

Tilburg University

Social Media Celebrity

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Publication date:
2018

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in Tilburg University Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Hou, M. (2018). *Social Media Celebrity: An Investigation into the Latest Metamorphosis of Fame*. [Doctoral Thesis, Tilburg University]. [s.n.].

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Social Media Celebrity

An Investigation into the Latest Metamorphosis of Fame

Social Media Celebrity

An Investigation into the Latest Metamorphosis of Fame

PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor
aan Tilburg University
op gezag van de rector magnificus,
prof. dr. E.H.L. Aarts,
in het openbaar te verdedigen ten overstaan van een
door het college voor promoties aangewezen commissie
in de aula van de Universiteit

op woensdag 23 mei 2018 om 10.00 uur

door

Mingyi Hou
geboren te Beijing, Volksrepubliek China

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ISBN 978-94-6299-974-9

Cover photo by Mingyi Hou

Cover design, layout/editing by Karin Berkhout, Department of Culture Studies, Tilburg University

Printed by Ridderprint BV, the Netherlands

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Preface

In our age, fame seems to be desired and despised at the same time. This book was also born in such a context, when the horse dance of *Gangnam Style* triggered globally enthusiastic and celebrative participation, as well as critiques of the Asian stereotype and vulgarity. In the early 2010s, many people became eager to know how fame was achieved on social media, and also many people lamented our public culture's preoccupation with transience and superficiality. Ordinary users expected to get their 15 minutes of fame, marketers strived to use the power of electronic word-of-mouth and dominant social powers were attentive to the newly emerging public figures. Leo Braudy's (1986) book *The Frenzy of Renown* brought me the insight that these mixed feelings towards fame, between keeping up with the fads and appreciating the best that has been thought and said, are not symptomatic of our digital age, but a transhistorical matter of social change. Therefore, I have adopted this theme of transfiguration as a sensitivity in exploring the novelty of internet fame, and its connection with a series of technological and social developments.

The book was written with two major challenges. Firstly, if we understand fame as the public acclaim about a single person, then we can always pin down a socially acceptable sense of individuality in fame. The history of all hitherto existing fame is thus the history of struggles over social recognition. However, on social media, the cultural meanings of viral stars may not provide adequate explanations for the wide scope of their popularity. Widely transmitted cultural tropes like Hatsune Miku, Psy or the ranting Hitler in the German movie *Der Untergang* were well received by audiences who do not understand Japanese, Korean or German languages. In other words, fame's power of signification is challenged, and the configuration of fame is diverting from a human representation of the zeitgeist. In this book, I have traced this change relating to various social, industrial and technological conditions.

Secondly, the transfiguration of fame in Western society according to Braudy is marked by an inherent contradiction between Roman ideals of public service – civic virtue –, and Judeo-Christian ideals of spirituality – private virtue. While reading this line of argument in Braudy's book, I was asking myself whether this has anything to do with, for instance, the fame of a Chinese public intellectual or an online Chinese beauty guru. After finishing this book, I can answer part of my bewilderment. My fieldwork showed me that the globalization of the culture industry and media technologies makes a social media celebrity in China look very similar to its Western counterpart, if not more advanced in terms of business model and technological innovation. In other

words, the traces of the two foundations of Western civilization have given rise to the cultural logic of modern celebrity and its industrial structure, rather than specific cultural contents.

However, if I was asked how the fame of Confucius looked like and whether it contributes to specific media representations of contemporary public figures in China, I would feel my ignorance regarding knowledge of Chinese history. As a foreign language major student, I was trained to translate Ban Ki-moon's speeches, to read Shakespeare and to draw Chomskian English (not Chinese) sentence diagrams. I clearly remember that while writing my BA thesis on code-switching practices of Chinese students, I was required that my data must be in English, because I was a student in a Foreign Language School. Of course, my college mates majoring in Chinese were learning how to add annotation to archaic Chinese books, and did not publish in English or cared about globalization. Writing this book has given me an opportunity to experience the anachronistic relationship between disciplinary boundaries and how human communications actually operate in today's world.

While conducting my research and writing this book, I have received great help and care from my supervisors, colleagues, friends and family. I shall express my gratitude to Professor Sjaak Kroon. Although having surprised many students with his strict and straightforward teaching method, he is indeed a mentor providing me with not only direction but also the drive that every PhD student needs, that is to put ideas on paper and to get the business done in a down-to-earth manner. My co-supervisor Dr. Piia Varis reads every sentence of mine carefully and with patience. She gives me valuable advice on attending academic conferences and publishing in journals. Also importantly, she is the supervisor who understands why her student writes about post-feminist media culture on the one hand, and spends way too much time dreaming about 'getting toned' in the gym on the other hand. I shall also express my thankfulness to my supervisor Professor Jan Blommaert, who brings me insights and inspiration every time we meet and talk about my work. He encourages me to ask not only academic questions, but also intellectual ones. Professor Odile Heynders also gave me great help during my research. As the head of the department, she encourages young female scholars to walk out of the office and to communicate with fellow scholars in academic conferences. As a teacher and colleague, we work together on the topic of Chinese public intellectuals.

I have enjoyed exciting and inspirational discussions with my colleagues in the Department of Culture Studies. Our Chinese cohort including Jin Di, Kunming Li, Hua Nie, Ying Lu and also Dr. Caixia Du and Dr. Jinling Li, all devote academic vigor to studying the new online/offline phenomena in China, but from very different perspectives and with distinctive topics. My colleague and office mate Paul Mutsaers is not only a role model for me at work, but also shows me his love and devotion to his family despite the busy and demanding academic life. In the end, I shall thank my parents for supporting and believing in every choice I have made in my life.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

This book is about the latest metamorphosis of fame. If we understand fame as a status where an individual rises above the rest of the population and poses an imagination of self upon them (Braudy 1986: 17–19), the conditions, techniques, and meanings of this status change throughout history. In other words, fame is sensitive to the social structures and the extent and modes of communication within a society (Braudy 1986: 587). Whereas fame used to be a privilege and obligation experienced only by heroes and rulers, since the early 20th century Hollywood has demonstrated us the possibilities of being an individual in a democratic society with a rags-to-riches story. However, the configuration of fame in the modern era is far more complex than a human representation of the zeitgeist in a society, in the sense that what modern celebrity signifies becomes increasingly volatile. We may identify dominant cultural identities in film stars' images, but they often live out the unfulfilled if not unfulfillable dreams of the social world (Dyer 1998; Braudy 1986: 588). Elitists lament modern celebrities' unreservedness and triviality, for they are celebrated merely for their appearance and private lives, rather than accountable accomplishments. In present-day media and entertainment industries, aspirants to fame are not necessarily skillful or talented. Instead, anyone can be manufactured into a standardized celebrity commodity. In Boorstin's much cited words, celebrity is someone who is well-known for its well-knownness (1971: 58).

Nevertheless, as long as we further consider why celebrity signifies, we may realize that it is not so much a matter of fame being devoid of any cultural content as it is of a changing social structure and media encouraging new forms of cultural meaningfulness. In pre-modern societies where social order was relatively fixed and hierarchical, honor could be easily defined. In comparison, a modern celebrity's fame is a type of affective power, functioning as an institutionalized irrationality which legitimates certain types of cultural identities as dominant and marginalizes others (Marshall 1997). The representation of a celebrity's appearance and personality includes a sense of intimacy and cultural belonging which used to be derived from family, community and organized religions (Schickel 1985; Rojek 2001). Moreover, the rise of the publicity industry and promotional culture also leads to a situation where achievements, especially those in the economic field, increasingly rely on positive media presence. If democracy is characterized by greater and greater disagreement over what constitutes as achievement (Braudy 1986: 588), then modern celebrity provides a solution by functioning as a site for the negotiation of social normativities, and slowly replacing older

forms of social recognition with glamorous media visibility as the purest form achievement. In a networked society of the information age (Castells 2010), social media affordances for interpersonal communication and networking activities provide an alternative way to fame in the form of social media celebrity: users whose high visibility is native to social media platforms.

But is there anything new in the fame of social media celebrity? This book will answer that question with a 'yes' and specify how this new configuration of fame is underscored by both continuity and rupture (abrupt change) from that of stars on the silver screen and TV. Indeed, a sense of familiarity compounded with novelty can be already discerned from the criticism and laments charged towards highly visible social media personalities. In China, for instance, the Weibo account of the Communist Youth League of China sparked a discussion on 'whether it is wrong to like a social media celebrity', demonstrating the controversial nature of internet fame¹ and mainstream society's attention towards the cultural phenomena of social media celebrity. In China, online fame is regarded as the culmination of self-obsession where heavily photoshopped selfies are used to display one's lifestyle and appearance relentlessly.² In doing so, the celebrities are also considered as greedy and vulgar attention-catchers who voluntarily monetize themselves as commodities. But besides the criticism of the preoccupation with individual appearance, which has existed since the rise of electronic mass media, social media users are also astonished when witnessing misinformation being disseminated and large-scale flame wars being incited by a handful of highly influential political microbloggers, who indeed speak with their words, not faces. Sometimes, a scandalous story or a cultural meme can suddenly become viral, either urging the clueless users to catch up with the fad or moaning about the meaninglessness of such media visibility. However, coming up with all these diagnosis of superficiality and meaninglessness, the Communist Youth League of China confirms that there is no 'original sin' in social media celebrity, as long as they can promote more 'positive vibes' in China's online space.³ Indeed, the Communist Youth League is turning itself into a social media celebrity on Weibo, packaging political messages with mischievous cultural tropes and in the meantime never forgetting to beg followers for a thumbs-up.

The cultural phenomenon of social media celebrity has attracted certain academic attention, which can explain some of the abovementioned concerns in popular dis-

¹ Sina Weibo is one of the largest microblogging social media platforms in China, owned by Sina. Inc. Many official institutions in China make use of their Weibo accounts for both publicity and public service aims. The Communist Youth League of China is one of them.

² A discussion of Chinese internet celebrity in popular discourse can be referred at: <http://www.theworldofchinese.com/2016/03/internet-superstar/>, viewed on 3rd November 2017.

³ http://weibo.com/3937348351/Ffylbx6a7?refer_flag=1001030106_&type=comment#_rnd1506240935307, viewed on 5th August 2017. Here we may understand the 'positive vibe' as the mainstream social and political values promoted by the government.

course. Social media celebrity is conceptualized as a cultural practice of self-presentation and interpersonal interaction resulting from the shifting media technology and labor conditions. 'Micro-celebrities' on the internet borrow the celebrification techniques from the traditional entertainment industry to conduct self-branding and status seeking activities among peer users (Senft 2008; Marwick and boyd 2011), which also benefits their offline professional profiles (Marwick 2013a). In these works, the fame of social media celebrity is understood as a result of the intensification of celebrity culture in contemporary societies, to the extent that the mentality of promotion and celebrification has infiltrated ordinary people's everyday life.

However, the previous research may not answer the question why fame can be also achieved without displaying embodied images like for instance the political micro-bloggers, and even a consensus on the denotative meaning of fame. In other words, in the digital world, the cultural content of fame seems to be further diluted. This study approaches this question by bringing the techno-economic infrastructure of social media celebrity and the networked social collectivity into consideration. Again, a comparison with mass media helps spell out my line of argument here. One of the cultural logics of mass media is the personification of public events. Many seminal works on celebrity culture, often in the ending chapter of a book, address the blurred boundary between politics and entertainment with some worrying notes (Cashmore 2006; Van Krieken 2012). This is not because entertainment content is inherently inferior to political contents, but because the public agendas nowadays are personified so as to be communicable and memorable. In other words, ideas and information need to be carried by a human face. This is a 'mode of observation', a unique stage in 'the history of seeing' in Barthes's sense (1981/1980). In his analysis on the face of Garbo, Barthes (1972/1957) reminds us how audiences learnt to see in the experience of film. The close-up scene of Garbo's face 'plunged audiences into the deepest ecstasy' (Barthes 1972/1957: 56). The face conveyed a 'Platonic idea', functioning as the archetype of human. No matter what this essence was, it was the medium of film that began to present it through mortal faces and existential beauty.

To a certain extent, we may regard the selfies on social media as a continuity of the way of seeing cultivated by the early film experience. However, social media does not organize users' attention directly through a centralized power of dissemination, as intensive as 'plunging audiences into ecstasy'. Instead, the popularity metrics, platform algorithms and various commercial cultural intermediary companies exert great influence on how and what we can see, thus how fame is being constituted on social media (Cunningham et al. 2016; Lobato 2016). This seems to be an entry point for us to consider why fame on the internet can become faceless and precarious in meaning.

Modern celebrity has been theorized as a multifaceted construct, being a form of media representation, industrially manufactured commodity and an important cultural resource providing social cohesion at the same time (Turner 2014). From both the popular discourse and academic discussion mentioned above we can see that social media celebrity inherits certain continuity from its predecessor on mass media.

Moreover, the ongoing trend of media convergence also means that IT and traditional entertainment companies are learning from each other's business model as well as cultural forms. Therefore, in this book, I will address social media fame through a framework which already informs our understanding of mass media celebrity. Specifically, I will analyze social media celebrities' cultural identities, industrial infrastructure, political significance and audiences' consumption activities. In the meanwhile, my analysis will move from the continuity to a rupture in the metamorphosis of fame. Therefore, the empirical chapters will be presented in a sequence in which the discussion departs from fame being all about appearance and personality, and arrives at a stage where online fame is faceless, then even completely loses a pre-determined denotative meaning.

I will start my discussion by firstly addressing the cultural meanings of social media celebrity. Around what themes is the image of celebrity built? What cultural identities rise to prominence online? The cultural power of traditional celebrity resides in the fact that it legitimizes certain cultural identities as heroes and heroines while marginalizing others. The criticism of this ideological function is often directed to the media and entertainment industries. Can social media celebrity represent not only the latest sense of self, but also previously marginalized and subversive identities?

I will then explore the industrial infrastructure of social media celebrity. I focus on how social media visibility is sustained, which explains to a certain extent the possibilities of social media functioning as an empowering cultural space. Traditional celebrity is characterized by its commodity nature, as celebrity image is manufactured and traded among interdependent industries for the aim of profit. Studies have shown that cultural intermediaries operating around the advertising market of social media platforms have adopted similar roles like that of traditional publicity and agency companies (Kim 2012; Cunningham et al. 2016; Lobato 2016). It is in this convergent environment where we can see the unique industrial logics of social media celebrity.

Next, the new configuration of fame will be addressed relating to its political significance in the public sphere. Fame in the form of an entertainment star has always been to blame for the decline of a more serious public culture (Habermas 1991). Not only does it attract people's attention away from politics and current affairs, but politicians and intellectuals are also contaminated by the emphasis on personality (Sennett 1977; Gamson 1994; Cashmore 2006). I will explore whether social media has introduced an online podium for 'the public man' who draws audiences' attention back to the content of deliberation rather than the face of the speaker.

Finally, the configuration of fame also needs to be examined in respect of its social functions. Why does social media celebrity attract attention and how are celebrity-related contents consumed? In traditional celebrity culture, fandom activities are characterized by intensive interpretive work and intense emotional investment (Jenkins 1992; Duffett 2013). How can we make sense of the viral transmission of social media celebrity content where the meaning of the original text is not as important as the recontextualized uptake in local sociocultural environments? More importantly, if the

pathological reading of fandom culture as forms of ‘obsessed individual’ and ‘hysterical crowd’ is related to a sense of uncertainty towards modernity and mass society (Jenson 1992), then what does viral fame tell about today’s social collectivity?

I now delineate the structure of this book. This introductory chapter will be followed by a theoretical chapter, which contextualizes the theorizations of modern celebrity with a historical perspective on fame. This enables us to see that celebrity in the form of an entertainment star indicates a sense of self and social relationships characterizing the social conditions and cultural logics of modern society. The very shape of our society, or the sense of being social, seems to be changing in the process of cultural and economic globalization. Among a series of characterizing features of this change, concepts including participatory culture (Jenkins 2006; Turner 2010, 2014), aestheticization of everyday life, the cultural logics of social media (Van Dijck 2013; Cunningham et al. 2016; Lobato 2016) and the networked society (Castells 2010; Wellman 2001; Blommaert 2018) are critical for us in exploring the transfiguration of fame in contemporary societies. The theories relating to specific case studies will be discussed locally in each chapter. The objects of my study include not only fame as cultural texts, but also fame as digital practices, as fame is achieved and consumed by social media users. In this sense, my research deals with situated experiences. Therefore, I have adopted digital ethnography as my approach in this research, to be addressed in Chapter 3.

In Chapter 4, I will explore the cultural identities of Chinese social media celebrities and gendered pattern in their media representation. Social media celebrity is a site where cultural identities are negotiated. Drawing on the theory of celebrity’s ideological power (Marshall 1997; Dyer 1998), the cultural identities of Chinese social media celebrity will be understood as gendered experiences of a neoliberal economic order by young people in China. Chapter 5 introduces an economic perspective on social media celebrity through the example of entrepreneurial beauty vloggers on YouTube. In this case study, I shall demonstrate that fame on the internet can last much longer than 15 minutes as an industrial structure of professional content creators is forming as a result of the institutionalization of YouTube and the emerging cultural intermediaries operating around YouTube’s advertisement infrastructure. Chapter 6 explores how political microbloggers on Weibo engage in public deliberation on historical events and current affairs. Their fame may be regarded as a break from the archetype of self-promotion and representation of appearances inherited from traditional celebrity culture, for the bloggers’ fame is achieved by invoking public concerns through sensationalism and the navigation of the platform’s popularity metrics. In Chapter 7, the function of social media celebrity will be explored through an investigation of the viral Korean pop hit *Gangnam Style* and its parodies. The analysis will demonstrate that the constitution of online fame does not necessarily rely on the fame’s denotative meaning as a prerequisite. Instead, fame can be a result of social media users’ need to maintain conviviality and ephemeral communities through various forms of semiotic work. I shall also reflect on whether such celebrity consumption practices introduce

new types of collectivity in the networked society. Finally, Chapter 8 will firstly provide a summary on the findings of the study, thus answering the question of what the latest metamorphosis of fame looks like. This will lead to a discussion about the convergence between fame as a predetermined sociocultural construct, and as an effect of communicative practices in digital environments.

Readers of this book may realize that the empirical chapters consist of both English language cases, e.g. YouTube beauty vloggers and Chinese cases like political micro-bloggers. As a type of media technology and an industrial structure, social media develop on the global scale with different local manifestations. In Appadurai's (1996) theorization of the electronic media, he suggests that 'these media ... are resources for experiments with self-making in all sorts of societies, for all sorts of persons' (1996: 3). In line with Appadurai's argument, this study inquiries into the different aspects of 'self-making' in social media environments and is attentive to the global/local interactions in every case, instead of contrasting and comparing local and global cases in a clear-cut manner.

CHAPTER 2

From stardom to social media celebrity

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will firstly introduce a theory of metamorphic fame. The configuration of famous figures changes throughout history, due to the fact that fame is a cultural institution organizing both the individual sense of self and social relationships. In other words, fame is sensitive to the technological, economic, and sociocultural environments in society. Then, I will synthesize a framework defining modern celebrity as a multifaceted construct against the socio-economic context since the early 20th century in Western societies. Stars are now produced in a globalized cultural industry. Their images trumpet liberal democracy and consumerism and provide resources for social cohesion in mass society. However, modern celebrity is most clearly distinguished from previous models of public acclaim by its reliance on widespread media coverage and the celebrification of individual idiosyncrasy. With an understanding of the fame formula in traditional entertainment industries, we can better understand how internet fame is both converging with and diverging from the previous model of public visibility. Last but not least, I will show that the conditions giving rise to stars are changing. Social media not only offer participatory potential for media representation and celebrification, but also redefine the content and ways through which aspirants and audiences identify social recognition with fame.

2.2 A theory of metamorphic fame

Braudy (1986) in his book *The Frenzy of Renown* develops a metamorphic perspective on fame. Fame consists of four elements: a person, an accomplishment, the immediate publicity and posterity's interpretation of this person. As these four elements are all sensitive to the social conditions and cultural assumptions within a society, the configuration of fame thus changes throughout history. In this regard, we can see both the differences (the change) and the similarities (the configuration) between, for instance, a film star's glamour on the silver screen and Jesus's message in the Gospels. The similarities indicate the nature and functions of fame in society. Both the film star and Jesus are bestowed by fame with the solitary eminence, the chance to be distinguished from the crowds, but at the same time being watched and imagined by them (Braudy 1986: 19). Fame stands 'in the crossroads of individuality and society, where personal psychology, social context and historical tradition meet' (Braudy 1986: 16). In Van

Krieken's words, the significance of celebrity is social and political, since it is an institution 'ordering both social relationships and the individual sense of self' (2011: 3).

The famous person synthesizes one's sense of uniqueness with next-door familiarity and makes the historical model a present urge (Braudy 1986: 585). An aspirant to fame needs to be different enough to raise interest, but not too different to be unintelligible and dangerous. A theory of metamorphic fame firstly allows us a synchronic perspective on society, to consider the famous as an example of a socially desired way of living. Here we can discern the power of rationalization and social control, in the sense that only the socially sanctioned personalities and cultural values are represented as legitimate (Marshall 1997: Chapter 3). Secondly, a theory of metamorphic fame also introduces a diachronic lens through which nuanced traces of cultural change can be discovered at its frontier, when newer cultural identities test the tolerance of an older regime of social recognition. For instance, Braudy indicates that Judeo-Christian ideals of fame emphasized humbleness, spirituality and private virtue, which denounced any audience but God, and could be achieved by anyone who believes in God. This model claimed the legitimacy of one individual against the illegitimacy of the social order and cultural assumptions of Republican Rome (Braudy 1986: 585), where fame was a class privilege and achieved through public service and civic virtue. In a similar vein, 17th-century audiences and readers began to replace patrons for the judgment of a theatrical character or writer's talent. As a result, the self-oriented literary fame became a challenge to the class-oriented social order. In Mill's (1956) words, printer's ink has replaced the blue blood.

2.3 Renown, fame and celebrity

In the previous section, I have conceptualized fame as standing at the nexus of social recognition and the mode of communication. In this section, I will apply this conceptualization to map out the distinctions between renown, fame and celebrity. Inglis (2010: 5) suggests that glamor and celebrity have replaced honor and renown characterizing the contemporary figures of fame. Renown was once assigned to men of high accomplishment in a few prominent and clearly defined roles such as 16th-century jurist, cleric, or scholar. Public recognition was for their actions, and honor was attached to the office, not the individual. In contrast, celebrity receives public acclaim for one's being and appearance, thus demonstrating the individualized nature fame. For Rojek (2001), a renowned person is attributed distinction informally within a given social network based on reciprocal personal relationship in the localized community. In contrast, a contemporary celebrity's fame is ubiquitous and fans attach strong emotions to them through non-reciprocal interaction. In both definitions, renown is the older model of public visibility, and fame is the current one. While Inglis captures the change in the nature of fame as being about the absence of achievement, and individualization, Rojek thinks it is a matter of the extent of communication. Different from these distinctions, in this study I align with Braudy's (1986) wider definition of fame as a

transhistorical status, an all-time thing. Fame used to be instantiated in the form of renown and honor, where achievement was bound with social hierarchy. The fame of modern celebrity exemplified by film stars or TV personalities is a result of the democratization of society, electronic mass media and globalized culture industry. Modern celebrity is thus distinguished from previous models of public visibility by democratized and ubiquitously disseminated representation of individuality through mass media.

Nevertheless, as Van Krieken (2012) suggests, celebrity should not be understood as totally detached from achievement. All heroes throughout history may have used a certain public relation machinery to make their achievement to be seen, and all modern celebrities are indeed famous for something. Achievement or talent and well-knownness exist in a continuum where every modern celebrity has a specific position. Kim Kardashian, for instance, may be criticized for occupying one extreme of this spectrum, but not only has she converted the surplus value of her well-knownness into a business achievement, she is also indeed famous for her sex tape and body image.⁴ The problem then is that our contemporary understanding of social recognition does not consider them as achievements, yet.

In a similar vein, Rojek (2001) also points out that the transfiguration of fame does not mean that the older model of recognition is swiped away by a newer one. Instead, they may co-exist and interplay with each other. He has identified three types of celebrity in modern society based on how celebrity status is acquired: *ascribed celebrity* inherits status through blood relations, *achieved celebrity* ascends to public attention through open competition, and *attributed celebrity* is a result of media coverage. We can imagine that each of these types of celebrity may be the dominant form of fame in a certain historical epoch and the archaic ones only leave some residue in contemporary societies. One example can be Princess Diana, whose status was ascribed within the monarchical system as a residue culture in contemporary society, but her image was also highly visible and accessible through media attribution (Johnson 1999). In general, we can identify a trend in the development of fame in contemporary societies: attributed celebrity through media coverage accounts more and more for one's ascendance to fame.

2.4 The multifaceted modern celebrity

In the previous section, I have shown that from a diachronic perspective the egalitarian fame of modern celebrity is distinguished from that of class-oriented fame of previous regime. In this section, I situate the fame of modern celebrity against the social conditions since the 20th century in Western society. Based on the findings from previous research, I will synthesize a framework defining modern celebrity as an effect of media

⁴ She has made profitable endorsement deals and launched her own cosmetics business. Further information at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kim_Kardashian, viewed on 3 November 2017.

representation, built on the ideology of modern democracy and consumerism, a mode of commodity in the cultural industry, and a tool to provide social cohesion in mass society. This discussion is relevant to the current study as social media industry is converging with traditional entertainment incumbents at the level of both industrial infrastructure and cultural forms.

2.4.1 The cultural meanings of modern celebrity

In this section, I will discuss the cultural meanings of modern celebrity from three perspectives. Firstly, the meanings are built upon the themes of success and consumption. Secondly, celebrity culture is gendered, not only in the sense that celebrity images negotiate gender normativities in society; the evolvment of film characters also demonstrate gendered patterns. Thirdly, celebrity is a cultural institution organizing public personalities and modern subjectivity (Marshall 1997).

Celebrity in traditional entertainment industry embodies a series of paradoxes, orchestrated by a success myth (Dyer 1998: 42). Firstly, celebrity is both ordinary and extraordinary at the same time. This contradiction echoes Braudy's (1986) characterization of the famous as a socially acceptable individualist, unprecedented but also kind of 'next door'. Within modern democracy, the sense of familiarity is explained by ordinariness. Stars are ordinary people in the sense that they do not inherit status and wealth through bloodlines like royalty. Potentially, anyone can become a celebrity through their own effort. However, they are also extraordinary since not everyone is endowed with talents and good appearance. Secondly, the ascendance to fame may be a result of good luck, or a sheer fabrication by the industry, suggesting fame can happen to anyone. But celebrity also requires dedicated professionalism and unimaginable hard work. Thirdly, there is a discrepancy but also interdependency between a celebrity's private self and public image. It almost becomes a cliché for a star to denounce one's public image as not one's 'true self', only to end up with this 'true self' willingly or unwillingly feeding another public spectacle.

The success myth of modern democracy, according to Braudy, derives from the motif of American Protestantism shaping both religious and political ideas (Braudy 1986: 608). It is self-contradictory since the myth emphasizes on the one hand self-sufficient uniqueness which requires no work other than being oneself and no audience other than God. But on the other hand, it preaches strivance for material achievements in the eyes of others. In this sense, we may think that celebrities being 'well-known for their well-knownness' based on 'marginal personality differences' (Boorstin 1971: 58–65) are not so much a superficial cultural preoccupation, or represent a moral decline from renown to fame, than a solution to the ideological contradiction inherent in modern democracy and individualism. Braudy (1986) argues that in a democratic society, where everyone is entitled with the aspiration for prominence, the justification for true achievement is precarious. Therefore, the celebration of being oneself, i.e. one's personality and appearance, seems to be the purest and safest way to personal distinction. Moreover, he also finds that people's craze for individualized

fame seems to be especially prominent during transitional periods in a society. In the beginning of the industrial age, for instance, when the previous definition of achievement was rejected, and a new one was yet to be established, fame became a form of currency and provided certain security in one's personal identity.

While Brady has provided ideological and sociological explanations for modern celebrity's incessant preoccupation with personality and appearance, we should also note that it was the new media technologies since the late 19th century that made the mass-scale dissemination of images possible. Stories about people began to dominate journalism, as 'human symbols dramatically summarize some local event or social problem or social tragedy' (Schickel 1985: 40). In the meantime, the use of photography in news also made it easier to disseminate human faces rather than ideas and reputation (Gamson 1994: 21). Moreover, film has created a new spectacle and new desire for mass audiences. Close-up scenes and larger-than-life images isolated an actor or actress, and enabled audiences to scrutinize their faces with a narrowness and nearness that can only be experienced in intimate relationships (Schickel 1985: 35). In Barthes' (1972/1957) analysis on Greta Garbo's face, he believes that Garbo's iconic snowy white and androgynous face was an archetype of the human, a Platonic idea. The content of this human essence may not be as important as its form of representation, and that is through mortal human faces. Barthes (1972/1957, 1981/1980) reminds us that film has cultivated a 'way of seeing' for audiences, plunging them into ecstasy through the scene of human faces. This mode of observation seems to be taken for granted today, as every social media account is meant to be marked with the face of the user. However, as I will discuss more in detail below, social media do not have a similar centralized power as film to arrange audience attention. Therefore, new ways of seeing will be cultivated.

Let us now continue the discussion with the cultural themes of modern celebrity. Besides the success myth, the image of modern celebrities is also built on the theme of consumption. Lowenthal (1944: 115–121) has observed in his study of the biographies in American popular magazines between 1901 and 1941 that the magazines of this period shifted focus from the 'idol of production' to the 'idol of consumption'. Previously, the protagonists in magazines were figures with achievements in vocations which served society's basic needs, such as bankers, politicians, artists, inventors and businessmen. Gradually, people from the sphere of consumption and organized leisure life became the dominant figures, such as entertainers and sportspeople. In a similar vein, Susman (2012) has identified a transition from the 'culture of character' to the 'culture of personality' starting from the early 20th century in American society. In the 19th century, character was a way of defining the self as 'a group of traits believed to have significance and moral quality' (Susman 2012: 273). Manuals, pamphlets and self-help books instructed people on the methods of self-mastery and self-development. The valued characters emphasized 'the fulfillment through sacrifice in the name of higher law, ideals of honor and integrity' (Susman 2012: 280). Susman points out that the link between personal development and social order is a brilliant support

for a producer-oriented society. From the early 20th century, however, another version of self began to appear in literature. One needed to develop a good personality, which was charming, attractive, unique and distinctive, to make oneself well-liked in society. This newer version of self is other-oriented and theatrical. Good manners and appearances were required and could only be developed in leisure time and through consumption.

Dyer suggests that the shift in the key features of personalities in public space took place in connection with the economic transition from capitalism to consumer capitalism in the early 20th-century American society (Dyer 1998: 39). Today, the culture of consumerism has developed to an extent that our daily life is saturated with commodity signs. Social media is an important locale where marketing and promotional messages are communicated. In this sense, social media celebrities as key opinion leaders of lifestyle in online communities play a similar role as traditional celebrities in contextualizing and personifying the process of consumption.

The evolvment of characters in media content is also underscored by a gendered pattern. According to Watt (1957), it is not until the emergence of the novel that fictional characters began to be particularized. This means that in novels the characters are no more general human types, but particular people in a particular time and space. It also makes a novel able to contrast an individual against his or her environment. However, in the cinematic world, the particularization of characters did not happen at the same pace for male and female roles. Johnston (1973: 24–25) has found that there are certain conventions in Hollywood genres which stereotype women. Men's roles in films have changed through history, whereas women's roles are a-historic and eternal. In other words, men are contrasted against different social historical backgrounds, where the meanings of being an individual in a society are derived. Women, in contrast, are less individuated, more type-based, except for some modifications in fashion. While modern celebrity culture has always been gendered, it is interesting to see whether this pattern also appears in social media celebrities' media representation.

Although the image of modern celebrity is built upon a series of themes characterizing the zeitgeist, it does not mean that the stars on the screen exactly mirror the available cultural identities in a society. This is merely an idealized model of celebrity manufacturing, where personae are produced by measuring consumers' self-images, demographics, and psychological needs with an aim to foster audience identification (Gamson 1994: 49). Instead, 'the theatre of modern fame is frequently an alternative to the more restrictive roles of the social world' (Baudry 1986: 588). Dyer also indicates that a star's image is imbued with ideological contradictions, which helps to reinforce or challenge dominant social values, conceal prevalent social problems or compensate people for the qualities lacking in their lives (Dyer 1998: 26). In other words, stars are sites where the uneasiness of being a socially sanctioned individual can be exposed, challenged or mitigated. For instance, Marilyn Monroe's image is a magical synthesis of the incompatible terms of the gender ideals in post-war American society, where

women were required to be both extraordinarily sexy and ordinarily innocent at the same time.

Film stars' magic of reconciliation runs parallel to Williams' (1961) analysis of the discrepancy between the structure of feeling and social characters. The structure of feeling is 'the culture of a period, the living result of all the elements in the general organization' (Williams 1961: 64). Social character is the abstraction of a social group with its value system of behavior and attitudes. The dominant social group in the mid-19th century was the industrial middle class who believed in the value of work, self-help and economic success, i.e. the idol of production in Lowenthal's (1961) sense. However, in the fictions of this era, the hero's confidence and ethics were confronted by the uneasy social realities such as loss of fortune. Thus appeared the magic solution where one received an unexpected legacy or made another bucket of gold in the colonies. In this scenario, the discrepancy between experience and ethics was solved by a sneaky resort to aristocratic ideals or colonialism, where we can discern the interaction between older structure of feeling and the reproduction of the dominant social character. Combining Williams' analysis with Dyer's conceptualization of stars' ideological function, we may understand modern celebrities' image as a means of coming to terms with social normativities, and a site for negotiation rather than straightforward reflection of cultural identities.

2.4.2 The commodity nature of modern celebrity

In the previous section, I have discussed the cultural meanings of modern celebrity from the perspectives of cultural themes, gendered patterns of representation and their relation to dominant cultural identities in society. In this section, I introduce the commodity nature of modern celebrity, which is one of the most important features distinguishing modern fame from previous models of public visibility. The birth of American motion picture industry marks the starting point of industrialized celebrity production (Schickel 1985; Gamson 1994). From then on, film stars, TV personalities and singers become commodities manufactured and traded for the aim of profit, which is a break from the earlier forms of theatrical and artistic fame. Rein et al. (1997) suggest that celebrity stands in the center of this business, supported by and also supporting eight sub-industries including: entertainment, communication, publicity, representation, appearance, coaching, endorsement, legal and business services industry.

The process of celebrity manufacturing is full of competing and coordinated interests among the several stakeholders (Turner 2014; Gamson 1994), among which two conflicts are the most relevant to the current study. The first is the conflict between personal promotion and vehicle promotion (Gamson 1994: 80–84). In general, vehicle means the media contents where a celebrity appears and his or her image is constructed. Whereas producers and sponsors wish the celebrity to be associated closely with the vehicle, the celebrity and celebrity team often try to promote the celebrity's name. This is because to increase the economic value of a celebrity is to increase the plasticity of one's image to fit as many roles as possible and endorse various types of

products. Being pinned down by a specific role in one story means restricting other career possibilities. Taken to an extreme, an emphasis on a celebrity's name instead of performance sometimes renders a celebrity as an empty attention catcher.

The second conflict derives from the fact that the entertainment industry and sponsors prefer formulaic personalities to insure the profitability of their investment. However, they also need ever fresher faces to attract audience attention. As a result, mass media celebrity is highly replaceable and disposable. These two conflicts in the celebrity-making process are pertinent to the current study, because they are rooted in traditional entertainment industry's business model, which features high investment of premium contents disseminated within limited media space. For a large pool of celebrity aspirants, the competition for casts and sponsor opportunities is fierce. As we shall see below, the social media business model is characterized by low-budget user content creation, automation and scalability (Cunningham 2015), which suggests a shift in the industrial logics of fame on social media.

2.4.3 The social functions of modern celebrity

The emergence of the star system at the turn of the 20th century was contemporaneous with a vast social transformation (Marshall 1997; Rojek 2001). People were released from the former ties of family, community and organized religion as traditional forms of authority and locales of cultural identity. A large number of migrant workers populated urban centers. For the dominant bourgeois class, the amorphous and anonymous crowd was a potential political threat, which needed to be configured and controlled. At this juncture of the changing social structure and sentiment, the concept of mass society was invented and consolidated by intellectual discourses (Marshall 1997). Crowd theorists such as Le Bon (1897/1895) characterized the mass as irrational and emotional, open to influence and thus in need of being directed by a strong leader.

From the perspective of the dominant bourgeois class, modern celebrity is instrumental in rationalizing and configuring the mass society. Marshall makes this argument by tracing the genealogy of social psychology, particularly its empirical application in mass communication studies, and its similar ideological foundation with modern celebrity culture. Social psychology deciphered mass behaviors into universal characteristics of individual human behaviors. In doing so, this scientific discourse trumpeted the liberal individualism by reducing the irrational collective to the rational individual. Marshall believes that modern celebrity has the same function of celebrating an individual who represents the universality of the mass. In the media industry, content producers applied social psychology to analyze the cultural tastes of different demographic groups. For instance, Gamson (1994: 68) finds that celebrity image is an embodied characterization of the average audience, which is measured according to audience's self-images, demographics, and psychological needs. In this way, differentiated audience groups were elicited by celebrity figures in media content, whose attention was then sold to advertisers targeting them as potential customers. Marshall summarizes this process as one of the most important capitalist projects in the 20th

century: the division of the mass into stable categories. While the capitalist producers apply celebrity to configure audiences and consumers through a top-down model, we may also consider how celebrity content is adopted and adapted in celebrity watchers' daily life.

The conceptualization of celebrity's role in the audience's life is also contained in the Durkheimian concern of social cohesion. For Rojek (2001), the spiritual vacuum that resulted from the deregulation and de-institutionalization of religion in the early 20th century was not filled completely by science and legal-rational systems of thought. Following this line of observation, he finds that the cultural power of modern celebrity converges with religion in many ways. For example, celebrity figures are immortal in media representation and public memory; and music festivals are able to raise mass hysteria. Besides making an analogy between celebrity and religion as an institution of attributing cultural power, scholars have also explored how mediated celebrity images organize social interaction. Horton and Wohl (1956) consider the relationship between celebrity and audience as a 'para-social' relationship. It is non-reciprocal, in the sense that celebrities seldom know their audiences, but the audiences attach intense emotions to celebrities. They are the 'intimate strangers' (Schickel 1985) in people's lives.

While scholars have consensus on the mediated nature of the intimate relationship between celebrities on the screen and audiences in front of the screen, they hold different opinions towards what role this 'long-distance intimacy' (Van Krieken 2012) plays in people's lives. Horton and Wohl believe that in most cases, para-social interaction is integrated to 'usual' social interaction. However, it may become a surrogate for the 'real' social interaction, in which case obsessed and socially isolated fans stalk or even kill their worshiped celebrity figures. This image of the frenzied fan, analyzed at length by Schickel (1985), has become a stereotype in the media representation of fandom culture (Jenson 1992; Jenkins 1992).

To counter the argument that celebrity culture is isolating and illusionary, many empirical studies suggest that we should not pathologize para-social interaction. Consuming celebrity content serves pedagogic functions in viewers' lives (Caughey 1978; Wood and Skeggs 2004) and expands viewers' social experience (Picirillo 1986). More importantly, a highly visible celebrity is the 'weak tie' in an urbanized and industrialized society, functioning as a mutual reference point, or lingua franca for otherwise disparate and segmented individuals. Caughey suggests that the artificial beings on the screen are the mutual acquaintances for strangers in bars or taxis, functioning as material for socializing. Feasey (2008) finds that celebrity gossip can become cultural capital for young women among their peers, and enable them to connect with peers in an egalitarian way. These studies remind us that while celebrity may be produced by conceptualizing mass society as categories, audiences may use a celebrity actively to conduct social interaction at local level. Therefore, we should not presume the social function of celebrity on the basis of (an imagined) social formation. On the contrary, the ways in which viewers consume and appropriate celebrity content may be an entry point for us in reflecting the dynamics of social cohesion.

2.5 Social media celebrity: The meanings of 'social'

The social conditions giving birth to stars are changing in the information age, where the instantaneous flow and exchange of information, capital, and cultural communication as the infrastructures constituting a global economy (Castells 2010). Among other things, 'the emergence of a new electronic communication system characterized by its global reach, its integration of all communication media, and its potential interactivity is changing and will change forever our culture' (Castells 2010: 357). A new version of fame has also emerged in the form of social media celebrity. It is the multi-layered meaning of 'social' in this name that indicates the shifting cultural, economic and social conditions of contemporary society. Firstly, 'social' conveys the communal ideal and the spirit of grassroots participation valuing human connectedness. Secondly, 'social' refers to the automated connectivity which is the major resource to be monetized by social media industry. Thirdly, 'social' is a new type of social cohesion as a result of institutionalizing previously informal and transient human interactions into formal rituals and routines on the internet.

According to Van Dijck (2013), the first meaning of 'social' in social media is the ideal of human connectedness promoted by this technology. She demonstrates that the origin of many social media platforms is a community-bound initiative, 'an indeterminate service for the exchange of communicative or creative contents among friends' (Van Dijck 2013: 6). This communalist ideal is maintained although many platforms are institutionalized into profit-seeking corporates. The platforms are promoted as facilitating interpersonal contact and networking activities, so that the weak ties in forms of professional, geographical or personal connections can be established. As social media provide interpersonal communication services rather than finished media products, the activity of content creation is shifted to users. This relates to another enthusiastic claim regarding social media's potential for grassroots participation. The power structure of the culture industry may be challenged, as its many-to-many communicative functionality invites 'the people formerly known as audience' (Rosen 2006) into content production and dissemination, a process conceptualized by Jenkins (2006) as participatory culture.

Many studies have discussed the semiotic potentials of participation on social media (Tyron 2008; Rymes 2012; Gilbert 2013; Du 2016). The participatory potentials of social media are also relevant to celebrity culture in respect of the widened access to celebrification techniques. Media visibility now can be achieved theoretically by anyone and in a DIY manner, bypassing the hegemonic gatekeepers of traditional entertainment industries (Turner 2014). The new aspirants to fame called micro-celebrities conduct a 'new style of online performance that involves people in amping up their popularity over the Web using technologies like video, blogs and social networking sites' (Senft 2008: 25). Marwick and boyd (2011) describe micro-celebrity as a series of practices 'involving viewing friends or followers as fan base; acknowledging popularity as a goal; managing the fan base by using a variety of affiliative techniques; and

constructing an image of self which can be easily consumed by others' (2011: 141). Turner (2010) explains the meaning of 'micro' in this conceptualization as 'operating within a relatively limited and localized virtual space, drawing on small numbers of fans such as the followers of a particular subcultural practice' (2010: 72). We can understand this scenario as an extension of the way of seeing cultivated by mass media, where aspirants to fame establish their images as representing certain predetermined sociocultural constructs; and audiences are trained to follow the images and recognize them as worthy spectacles.

Related to the concept of micro-celebrity is what Turner (2010, 2014) has identified as the 'demotic' turn in contemporary media culture. Demotic means 'of the people or for the people,' designating the phenomenon of more ordinary people performing ordinariness on media. Social media also play an important role in this process. As a result, the media contents we consume are shifting from drama to life, and the stars' glamor is increasingly supplemented with a sense of mundaneness. We may also consider the cultural phenomenon of performing ordinariness from a wider perspective. Contemporary consumer culture operates around lifestyle, where consumption behaviors connote individuality, self-expression and a stylistic self-consciousness (Featherstone 2007: 81). Bourdieu (1984) links the stylization and aestheticization of everyday life with the emergence of the new *petite bourgeoisie* in the cultural intermediaries like the marketing and advertisement industries who provide symbolic goods and services. The message conveyed by the cultural intermediaries is a learning mode towards life, making lifestyle choices through consumption an investment for cultural capital. According to Bourdieu (1984: 370), converting the mundane into an art is a play of distinction at the least cost, a way for the new *petite bourgeoisie* to secure their social power. The idol of consumption that emerged in the early 20th century has proliferated in contemporary societies, to the extent that anyone with a social media account can display their lifestyle choices.

Without denouncing the semiotic potentials – ordinary users being able to participate in the creation and re-creation of cultural signs – of social media technology, we should also realize that each media innovation throughout history is alleged to liberate people and contribute to social progress. Close examinations reveal that the emancipating agenda and egalitarian promises of social media could be users' sincere expectations, and the objects of optimistic arguments in academia, but they could also be a marketing ploy by internet companies (Van Dijck 2011; Fuchs 2014) and strategic narratives of political parties (Schäfer 2011). Marwick (2013a) identifies a contradiction in the industrial culture of social media. On the one hand, social media technology is promoted as an equalitarian communication tool which fights against the fundamental deficiencies in corporate capitalism. On the other hand, the owners embrace venture capital to popularize their social media platforms. In a similar vein, Van Dijck (2013) points out that social media are not only tools enhancing human networks, but they are also automated systems that engineer and manipulate connections based on algorithmic behavioral profiles and coding relationships between people, things and ideas.

Schäfer (2011) argues that participatory culture cannot be reduced to user activity alone, since it also unfolds on a technological level. He puts forward a distinction between ‘explicit participation’ and ‘implicit participation’. For instance, taking part in fan culture, activism or writing blogs can be considered as explicit since the interactivities are prominent in those practices. Nevertheless, ‘passively’ watching videos or searching on search engines are also a type of participation, since browsing history is an important form of user behavior that is captured and added to the behavioral profile of a user.

These data are valuable resources for the business model of a platform. Behavior profiles may predict lifestyle choices and further purchasing preferences so that advertisements can be placed in a customized and personalized manner, which is a more effective way to target audiences than mass media advertisements. Moreover, connectivity among users entails the quantification of sociality (Van Dijck 2013). Online behaviors such as liking, friending or following express not so much nuanced social affections than numerical popular metrics. Users with large numbers of friends and likes in a network, i.e. the celebrities, are considered by marketing practitioners as key opinion leaders and tastemakers, who can spread the word-of-mouth for a brand or product. Meanwhile, agency companies also provide services aggregating different genres of social media contents, and thus different types of social media celebrities into advertisement verticals.⁵ In this sense, making communication social by facilitating connectivity, is an advanced way of surveillance and capitalist control. We have mentioned that celebrity articulates a type of social power where the crowd is configured into intelligible audience groups in the 20th century (Marshall 1997). Now, the power of social media is more productive in Foucault’s (1995/1977) sense, as the platforms encourage self-expression and interaction, functioning as both a playground for fun and a prison for examination. The power of social media also operates at a meticulous level, in the sense that every online activity of the user and his or her nuanced lifestyle preferences can be captured by the algorithms.

Now we may rethink whether every social media user can emulate Garbo’s spectacular moment by displaying their personality and appearance online. The above-mentioned discussions on the technological affordances of social media reveal that networking platforms do not organize audiences’ attention through a centralized power of dissemination. Instead, the algorithms and popularity metrics can decide what and how audiences see. In this sense, social media are cultivating a new mode of observation among audiences, who learn to evaluate and contribute the most liked, most commented on and most reposted content as exceptional and extraordinary. Garbo’s face is being replaced by the thumbs-up button.

⁵ Vertical refers to vertical markets in which services and goods are specifically targeted for a specific group of consumers instead of divergent consumer groups. More explanation available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vertical_market, viewed on 7 December 2017.

This new way of seeing on social media also introduces a new type of social collectivity. The previously ephemeral and informal interactions such as showing holiday pictures to friends or daily greetings are institutionalized as a ritual or routine and performed on social media (Blommaert 2018). Traditional sociological analysis often prioritizes thick groups like those based on class, gender or ethnicity. Now various online practices have shown that sociality can be formed around 'light' communities. For instance, the viral transmission of internet memes creates ephemeral and on-demand communities, where acquaintances interact in a phatic manner (Varis and Blommaert 2015). Not only will a new internet meme quickly replace an older one, but the meaning of the meme is also precarious. The virality of a cultural meme is constituted by the demand of social media users to configure their communicative environments through recontextualization. In a similar vein, Wellman (2001) suggests that networks are substituting spatial communities. In a traditional sociological sense, communities are based on the sharing of values and social organization. In contrast, networks are built through choices and strategies of social actors. Wellman regards this type of social formation as personalized communities in the trend of privatization of sociality. The discussion of new types of social collectivity is relevant to the current study. In both popular and academic discussions, we seem to have an unjustified critique of fame on social media as something less than celebrity, or a cheap purchase of celebrification techniques, because fame as such is subcultural, micro, transient and precarious in its denotative meaning. This critique may be caused by an older sense of being social, where celebrity should be ubiquitous, iconic and era-defining, in other words, an indicator for social cohesion in mass society.

2.6 Summary

In this chapter, I have delineated a theoretical framework which helps the current study to examine fame both diachronically and synchronically. The theorization of stardom against the socio-economic context of modern society has provided the parameters for us to consider fame in the globalized digital age. In the meantime, I have specified the distinctiveness of modern celebrity compared to previous models of public visibility, as media representation of individuality has become a type of social recognition legitimizing stardom. This was a sensitivity that I then further introduced into the discussion of the social and technical significance of social media. Drawing upon previous studies, I have suggested that the participatory affordances of networking platforms are directing the conditions to fame away from a predetermined sociocultural construct to popularity metrics-dependent publicity strategies, and appearing as an effect of social media users' communicative practices.

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss methodological concerns relevant to this research. Digital ethnography is adopted as the approach to study the conditions and shape of fame on social media. The ontological and epistemological standings of ethnography allow me to understand social media celebrity culture as users' situated semiotic practices in specific technical and cultural contexts. Nevertheless, doing ethnography in digital environments is challenged by the multifacetedness of the internet and the features of digital communication, in a way that contextualization becomes unpredictable. The conceptualization of digital practices as polycentric and opening to ever changing chronotropic configurations can help my ethnographic work to meet this challenge and is also consistent with the highly mobile and heterogeneously constructed fame on social media. Here I also introduce how my research fields in each of the case studies (Chapters 4–7) are constructed along the process of observation, rather than identified *a priori*. Finally, some ethical concerns are addressed.

3.2 Digital ethnography

3.2.1 Digital ethnography for a study of fame

In this study, I adopt digital ethnography as an approach to explore celebrity culture and practices on social media. By doing so, this study espouses the ontological and epistemological standings of ethnography that human actions are infused by social meanings, intentions, motives, attitudes and beliefs, which can be better understood if we explore them in their natural state, by gaining access to the meanings guiding those behaviors (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). In other words, human behaviors should be studied in context rather than through experiments or other standardized measurements. As more and more social interactions can be carried out on various forms of digital media nowadays, researchers also apply the ethnographic approach to study digital culture and communicative practices. According to Androutsopoulos (2008), research on technologically mediated communications has shifted focus from the formal features of the interactions, such as 'email language' or 'trolling', to investigations of contextualized actions. More attention is given to the functional aspects such as the communicative purpose and its social embeddedness. Digital ethnography is an approach appropriate for such inquiry, since it does not presume the universality

of digital experiences. Rather it examines digital practices as locally situated experiences which involve the engagement with specific social contexts, platforms and semiotization (Varis 2016).

An ethnographic approach is appropriate for this study from the following perspectives. Firstly, it is in line with my definition of social media celebrity which underlines the performative and participatory features of fame in the digital age. Social media celebrities are users who maintain an audience and manage to achieve media visibility. In other words, we may understand the celebrity culture on social media from the perspectives of commodification, social cohesion, cultural identity and political participation; however, the priority is that these are the cultural practices people engage with through digital means. Drawing on Hine's (2000: 9) classification, I consider social media in this research as both a cultural artefact and culture. From the perspective of cultural artefact, social media technology is produced by particular people with contextually situated goals and priorities. This line of conceptualization directs my attention to the industrial and social infrastructure sustaining this new version of fame. From the perspective of the internet as culture, I understand social media as a space where celebrity practices and discourses emerge and form their own normativities.

Secondly, digital ethnography's emphasis on contextualization and situatedness is consistent with the theorization of fame in this study. It is exactly because fame is a form of social recognition, conditioned by the means and forms of communication that we should understand fame against its specific technical, industrial and social contexts. Thirdly, the critical strength of ethnography can help us to expose the power relationships entailed in fame. As Blommaert and Dong (2010: 10) point out, ethnography has the potential and the capacity of challenging established norms which govern the social dimensions of meaningful behaviors. Therefore, an ethnographic approach enables this study to be sensitive to the subversiveness of social media celebrity culture, rather than repeating the moralistic and elitist judgments on its undeservingness or seeing it as sheer entertainment.

3.2.2 The challenge of contextualization

The mediated and multifaceted nature of the internet also introduces methodological challenges for digital ethnography. Hine (2015) delineates the ontological nature of the contemporary internet as being embedded, embodied and everyday, which requires ethnographers to make reflexive and strategic adaptations in their methods. With embeddedness, Hine argues that the internet is not a discrete and transcendental space which is separated from the rest of the world. Instead, it is 'entwined in use with multiple forms of context and frames of meaning-making' (2015: 33). The very practice of contextualizing digital practices becomes complicated as researchers need to look outward to seek connections and various forms of possible meaning-making frames, which challenges researchers when deciding the scope of their research and delineating the boundaries of the field.

The internet is embodied in the sense that although users may be represented online by avatars and texts, it is always the socially situated bodies in material form that sit behind the screen, engaging with the technologies. This means that users are always both online and offline. Varis (2016) reminds us that the offline environment of the material body may add another layer of normativity to digital experiences. For instance, while posting selfie pictures seems to be regulated by online cultural normativities, it may not be regarded as appropriate if someone does it at a funeral. This suggests that other than the finished interactive products which ethnographers can capture through the screen, the offline environment is also important for a situated understanding of digital practices.

The internet has also become an everyday existence. Instead of being a place where we go to, it is now an important infrastructure for getting our business done in daily life. Indeed, we may no more describe our activities in front of various forms of screens as 'surfing the internet', but more specifically 'reading breaking news' or 'ordering groceries'. The challenge here is that the internet as infrastructure tends to be taken for granted by users and difficult to be set as a topic of conversation. However, we also topicalize the internet by attributing it the agency for either risky social problems or revolutionary social change. Hine (2015) suggests that ethnographers should pay attention to both the remarkable and unremarkable sides of the internet.

Apart from the multifacetedness of the internet, which makes contextualization of digital practices unpredictable and situated meanings precarious, the technical features of the internet also needed to be included in an ethnographic understanding of digital practices. boyd (2008) argues that social network sites are networked publics, where interactions are characterized by the features of persistence, searchability, replicability and scalability. Varis (2016) argues that replicability and scalability are critical features for ethnographically important notions of indexicality and contextualization. Replicability means that semiotic resources on the internet can be easily duplicated, and scalability means that these resources are highly mobile, and can diffuse to wider and unpredictable audiences. As a result, semiotic resources on the internet may undergo the processes of recontextualization and resemiotization. This is what we see in a series of derivative cultural forms such as mash-up, remix or parodies. This again adds complexity to the ethnographic work of contextualization.

So far, I have discussed the challenge of contextualization in digital ethnographic research, which is determined by the ontological nature of the contemporary internet and the features of digital communication. According to Hine (2010), this challenge is critical for ethnographers to delineate the scope of their research. At the level of operation, it is a matter of defining the research field. This methodological challenge should be met and adaptive methods adopted according to the specific theoretical framework and research questions of the study. The current study tries to gain an understanding of social media celebrity through the political economic and cultural analysis of media. However, one of the underpinnings for such media visibility is the socio-cultural recognition of fame. With this multi-disciplinary context in mind, the meaning-

making frames or the potential scope of contextualization in this study may include the social media as an industry, cultural normativities of different online communities, and also wider systems such as sociocultural expectations on individual identity, political and economic situations. In order to do so, this study seeks connections and makes sense of the situated practices across multiple online sites.

3.2.3 Following connections

In pre-digital ethnographic work, researchers would define a research field as a location, for instance, a village or a street corner. Research as such reinforces the idea that culture is geographically bound. However, this may not be the case in our contemporary polycentric social environments in which cultural practices are oriented towards multiple evaluative centers, and being allowed and sanctioned by ever changing timespace configurations. For instance, Blommaert and De Fina (2015) have given an example of this in their theorization of chronotopical identity: while a boss still maintains a relatively authoritative role when s/he spends recreational hours with fellow colleagues in a pub, but in the meantime, his or her practices are also sanctioned by the after-work pub life timespace context so as to fit in with the group. Thus, the boss' practice cannot be contextualized accurately as simply bound with either the location of office or pub.

The social practices on the internet even complicate this scenario, as they require neither physical nor temporal presence (Blommaert and De Fina 2015). The embeddedness, embodied-ness and everydayness of the contemporary internet also urge us to consider digital practices as opening to mobility and connections (Hine 2015). Marcus (1995) argues that ethnography could be adapted to 'examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects and identities in diffuse time-space' (1995: 96, cited from Hine 2000). In a similar vein, Buscher and Urry (2009) suggest a mobile adaptation of ethnography, where researchers can follow the movement of people, things and ideas. In this regard, a research field does not stay online or offline to be discovered by ethnographers; rather it is constructed by ethnographers' active engagement with research questions and participants. Importantly, ethnographers should be reflexive about their agentive choices (Amit 2000).

Following this line of argument, the current study does not restrict the site of observation merely in one site. Fame is meant to be mobile, known by more people in more places and utilized in different ways. For instance, the fame of a YouTuber is not only generated in a video; he or she is also discussed in gossip forums, but also quantified in analytical websites indexing the commercial value of his or her media visibility. From a celebrity watcher's perspective, when one wishes to know a celebrity, it is possible for one to search the personality's name and 'dig' information about him or her in multiple online sites. From another perspective, the sociocultural foundation of fame suggests that it may not be accepted universally by different sections of a population in a society. A holistic understanding of fame therefore includes not only the acclaim but also the denial of it. These features of fame therefore require the study to

‘see subjects as differently constituted, as not products of essential unity of difference only, but to see them in development – displaced, recombined, hybrid in once popular idiom, alternatively imagined’ (Marcus 2012: 19).

In this study, my research field is constructed across multiple social media platforms. When media research and celebrity culture meet the internet, the distinction between online and offline is not a matter of virtuality and reality, but a matter of on-screen and off-screen (or onstage and offstage). Bakardjieva (2009: 56) points out that in pre-internet media research, distinctions are made among the study of content, the study of production, organization and process, and the study of reception and audience. For instance, the analysis of media images and discourse is conducted on-screen and is medium-centered; while the investigation of audience reception is conducted off-screen and is user-centered. This distinction also holds true for the study of celebrity culture and we can find some similar patterns in the methods adopted for on-screen and off-screen study. The exploration of ideological meanings embedded in celebrity images have an on-screen focus, and usually employs discourse analysis (e.g. Dyer 1998). An industrial insider’s view on the celebrity production process can be gained through interviews (e.g. Gamson 1994; Turner 2014), but ethnographic work may be difficult since what the industry does is to control the images of celebrities for profit. Ethnography can be applied to study fandom activities or audience reception, so as to understand how industrially produced culture is incorporated into lived experiences. However, such studies mainly adopt methods such as focus group discussions, interviews and experiments (e.g. Gamson 1994: Chapter 7).

While Bakardjieva (2009) suggests that not every study needs to cover both sides of the on-screen/off-screen, I believe that the affordances of social media can offer the opportunity to capture, to a certain extent, both the medium and user perspectives in celebrity culture solely through the study of online environments. We can study celebrity culture as situated practices because many representations and celebrification practices can be carried out by users in a DIY manner (Turner 2010) and archived, although not all transparently, as profile activities on social media accounts. In this sense, within digital environments we can examine celebrity signs/ discourses, celebrification practices, social media’s technical parameters, as well as audience reception in the form of commenting or evaluating. Of course, I need to note what I cannot capture without extending the scope of my research to offline settings. In my case these include the ‘backstage’ of celebrity manufacturing, which is not usually presented to the public, and the ways in which social media celebrity culture is embedded into both celebrity personalities’ and audiences’ lives.

3.3 Constructing the fields along the process of observation

In the previous section, I have pointed out that digital ethnography is facing the challenge of accurate contextualization in digital environments. To meet this challenge in my study, I need to follow the transmission of fame across various cultural spaces due

to its mobile nature. As celebrity discourses, celebrification practices and audience reception all can be represented, to a certain degree, on social media, digital ethnography can blur the boundary between on-screen/off-screen research. In this section, I shall introduce how the research field is constructed reflexively along the process of observation.

The research is composed of four case studies, which address the cultural identities, industrial infrastructure, political significance and social functions of social media celebrity respectively. On the contemporary internet, celebrity personalities and discourses proliferate, which makes it difficult to identify the research field a priori by saying 'voilà, social media celebrities appear on this and that site'. Therefore, I can only pinpoint a starting point. This is usually a celebrity's social media account which is the primary channel for representation. Here I need to explain the starting platforms for each case study. The specific sites and participants selected for each case study will be discussed in the chapters to follow.

In the case of social media celebrity's cultural identities (Chapter 4), my point of departure is Weibo fashion microbloggers and comic video actors in China. This is because Weibo is the most popular open social networking site in China with functionalities combining those of Facebook and Twitter. Most social media celebrities employ their Weibo accounts as the major site for communicating with fans. In Chapter 5, the industrial underpinnings of social media celebrity will be demonstrated through the case of beauty YouTubers. The business strategies of YouTube, after being acquired by Google, are representative of the institutionalization and commercialization path of social media platforms. In Chapter 6, to investigate internet fame's relevance for the public sphere and political discussions, I focus on political microbloggers on Weibo. This is because providing affordances for political deliberation used to be one of Weibo's brand images in the ecology of social media platforms in China. In Chapter 7, to discuss the consumption of celebrity products and its implications for new forms of social cohesion, I take the example of the *Gangnam Style* music video, which was the most ever viewed YouTube video until July 10th 2017. Therefore, the starting point is YouTube.

The major instrument applied in this research for data collection is observation. I observe social media celebrities' celebrification practices, media representations and discourses, which are regarded not merely as multimodal texts, but also online practices performed through texts (Jones et al. 2015). In other words, I study forms of interaction, meaning making, and cultural production through text (Boellstorff et al. 2012: 119). The core unit of my observation is not a group or a community of people, but the celebrification and negotiating activities performed by celebrities and their audiences. I try to approach the fields and participants in a natural way, like a social media user who is interested in a certain topic or personality, thus searching for detailed information on the internet. My role as a researcher in this process leans towards the end of observer along the continuum between observer and participant. I am not a

participant in the sense of engaging with fandom activities explicitly or striving to establish conversation with celebrities. However, I am a participant by consuming online celebrity contents.

My observation proceeds from the site where fame is produced to the site where fame is taken up by wider publics.⁶ Specifically, I firstly subscribe to the social media accounts of the celebrities, whom I have selected as participants. The process of selection will be discussed in the empirical chapters. I try to make myself familiar with the cultural contents and atmosphere in the accounts by reading the most recent posts or watching the most recent videos. I also read followers' and subscribers' comments to these contents. Once I feel that I have gained an understanding of what is going on at the moment, I start to explore the archived data in celebrities' social media accounts, by examining previous activities and updates that have been documented as log data. The pros and cons of the fact that, due to the functionalities of social media, interactive processes appear to the researcher as log data need to be discussed here. On the one hand, my observation does not need to be synchronic with the celebrities' activities in real time; otherwise the field work might also require me to be in the field for 24 hours per day. Moreover, I can also observe what has happened retrospectively. On the other hand, as Varis (2016) argues, what I can gain access to, are the results of interaction, rather than the process of it. Therefore, I need to be aware that the deletions and modifications in the accounts may not be directly observable.

The unobservable deletions and modifications of posts or videos are critical for my field work, since they may suggest the moments of uneasiness, controversy and potential conflicts in the celebrities' media representation. Moreover, the audience members who are willing to comment on and subscribe to the celebrities may be fans or at least have a certain interest in celebrity culture, which may not be the case for the entire audience a celebrity has. It is at this moment that I decide to move around in the field following the engagement with fame to other possible sites. Therefore, I also search for other material with the celebrities' names and the topics relevant to each case study that I have observed on their accounts on the same social media platform. In this way, I follow the connections and discussions from the core site of fame practices to wider publics' reception towards the celebrities. This method is especially effective for gaining some understanding of the heterogeneity in, and multi-construct-ness of fame by, different audience groups.

As Hine (2015) suggests, the contemporary internet is both mundane and yet as a controversial topic in public discourses. While the self-branding practices on celebrities' social media accounts may indicate a taken-for-granted view towards what practitioners are doing, as either a way of life, or a communal ideal of sharing 'moments'

⁶ Here, the sites where fame is produced and taken up by wider publics are only analytical concepts that organize my observation. On social media, audiences' appropriation of celebrity related signs is always a way to re-produce his or her fame.

with others, the online news articles and other discussion forums may contain topicalized reflections on social media visibility. As I immerse myself in the celebrification practices and discourses, I also need to realize that not everyone uses the internet as a way to fame. Therefore, I also search the celebrities' names on search engines so that I can explore meta-discourses about media visibility on the internet. At this stage, I read the yielded search results in the forms of news articles, comments to the articles, and discussions in online forums.

Along this movement across multiple sites in my field work, I try to be reflexive about my own agency in the construction of the fields. Moving away from the celebrities' accounts to other sites on the same platforms is directed by my research question to gain a holistic view of the personalities at hand, not only in the comfort zone among one's fans and in a relatively controlled environment of one's own profile, but also among competitors, anti-fans and the wider cultural ecology. The next move to news articles and discussion forums is directed by my interest to see fame on the internet to be discussed as a topicalized issue. This may include discussions about the role of the internet as infrastructure, as well as sociocultural normativities about what and who deserves media visibility.

It's not easy to get hold of celebrities for academic interviews, as their public images are controlled meticulously for profit. From another perspective, as Blommaert and Dong (2010) suggest, people do not have an opinion on everything they do or think. However, social media celebrities' interview articles and their own narrations of celebrification practices, if used reflexively, may become valuable data. More specifically, I do not use them as complementary off-screen data. Instead, I consider them as a specific type of celebrity discourse, which responds to public interest and concerns towards celebrity culture on the internet. Such discourse can help illuminate what we are talking about when we talk about social media celebrities.

3.4 Capturing the data and online analytical tools

The main means for me to capture the data materially is to take screenshots. For the news articles, I also save them as webpages or PDF files in my local disc. For video contents on YouTube, I use the software ClipGrab to download the videos. Varis (2016) suggests that digital ethnographers are engaging with new kinds of social-cultural activity, and new types of environments, and therefore researchers need to be methodologically innovative. One of the new creations in today's social media industry is data management and analytics. Many big data companies have set up public and free analytical websites which provide basic quantifications of social media celebrities' popularity and trends in account development. Nevertheless, Marres and Weltevrede (2013) remind us that ethnographers should be aware that the analytical results only reveal the significant and interesting points according to the values and assumptions embedded in these tools. In my research, the analytical tools I adopt are designed for users to identify social media influencers for marketing and publicity purposes. The

results summarize the trajectory of their account development based on a series of popular metrics such as subscriber number and view count. The tools also project celebrities' potential economic gains. In this sense, it is appropriate for me to use these data when I explore celebrities' monetization models and commercial values.

3.5 Ethical concerns

In this research, I have observed celebrity practices and discourses on celebrities' social media profiles, news articles, comments to news articles, and discussion forums, which can be regarded as networked publics – publics that are restructured by networked technologies (boyd 2008). I observe these multi-modal practices without disturbing the processes, and in many cases, my observation is asynchronous with the activities. In this sense, I am experiencing what many celebrity watchers do on the internet, as not everyone is an active content creator and even fewer people receive responses from the celebrities they watch. However, I need to address some ethical concerns about observation without being noticed by those observed during ethnography. From one perspective, the researcher's invisibility can reduce the observer's paradox to the lowest degree. Some researchers regard lurking as a good way to access natural online behaviors (Kozinets and Handelman 1998; Shoham 2004). Of course, this does not mean a researcher never exerts any influence in the field. As I search for information with a celebrity's name as the keyword, subscribe to his or her account or watch the videos, I am feeding the algorithm of the platform, which is indeed an implicit form of participation as suggested by Schäfer (2011). However, in this scenario, the participants are not aware of their status of being observed for academic study, thus raising ethical concerns.

Here, I need to explain the nature of my research field and the topic I am engaging with. First of all, my research environments are usually subscription or non-subscription based networked publics. As Boellstorff et al. (2012) mention, it is not necessary to have every person in an interaction sign for an informed consent in such types of public areas, just like there is nothing inherently unethical about taking a picture in an open area of an amusement park. With respect to my research environment, what I observe is celebrity culture and practices which are not only public but also aim at publicity. The social media profiles I have browsed are all restricted to figures with public recognition. I did not follow celebrity watchers, i.e. fans, subscribers, commenters to their social media profiles, because my research question is about the shape and conditions of fame, rather than fandom activities. Moreover, according to the International Sociological Society's Code of Ethics, 'researchers can make use of data gathered in historical archives, both private and public under the legal conditions laid down in

the country concerned and usually by the international scientific community, and subject to the rule of the archive.’⁷ In other words, a researcher can access publicly available contents without the consent of the authors. Secondly, the topics under discussion in each case study relate to lifestyle, entertainment, cultural identities and public affairs, which do not entail sensitive issues that may endanger the participants.

Another ethical issue is anonymity. Firstly, I do not anonymize celebrities’ screen names as they are publicly recognized figures. Secondly, digital data is characterized by searchability, or in other words googleability (boyd 2008; Varis 2016). This means that in some cases, although I anonymize a participant’s screen name, one can also be identified online by searching the contents of the discourse.

However, I would not like to compromise the accuracy of participants’ voices by interpreting and paraphrasing their comments, because some analysis of the data focuses exactly on the discursive features of the comments and posts. Again, considering the non-sensitive materials I am engaging with, my research will not put participants in risky situations if their online identity is revealed.

3.6 Summary

In this chapter, I have discussed the theoretical and epistemological relevance of digital ethnography to the current study. An ethnographic approach not only enables me to understand social media celebrity culture as situated digital practices, but also allows me to make sense of the sociocultural conditions of this recent version of fame. Another advantage of this approach is that I can be creative in terms of data collection by following the circulation of fame across multiple social media sites and utilizing quantification tools which characterize contemporary social media industry’s cultural logic. In the following Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7, empirical case studies will explore social media celebrity from the perspectives of cultural identities, industrial infrastructure, political significance and audiences’ consumption practices. Detailed accounts of participant and site selection, procedures of observation, the specific analytical tools used as well as the time frames of the field work will be discussed in these empirical chapters.

⁷ Source: <http://www.isa-sociology.org/en/about-isa/code-of-ethics/>, data retrieved on 1 May 2017.

The cultural identity of social media celebrity

4.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the cultural identities enacted by social media celebrities in China's online space. In Chapter 2, I have discussed the idea that modern celebrity can be distinguished from previous models of public visibility by the ubiquitous dissemination of individual personality and appearance through electronic mass media. Nowadays, one type of the most complained about social media users is those who accompany every update with a selfie, regardless of whether it is to moan about gloomy weather or a warm greeting on Mother's Day to one's mother who does not in fact use social media. These anecdotal examples may be an over-simplification; however, they indeed reveal that on social media the representation of an individual's image is a cultural preoccupation just like its predecessors on the silver screen and TV. The difference is that on social media the means to media representation can be seized by non-professional users.

Previous studies on social media celebrity question why displaying appearance and personality begin to matter for ordinary people, as if 'the unwatched life is not worth living' (Gamsom 2011; Marwick and boyd 2011). A sociological answer is the celebritization of society (Van Krieken 2012), meaning that the logics of media spectacle and personality cult have infiltrated ordinary people's everyday life, thus yielding a kaleidoscope of mortal faces in our cultural spaces. To a certain extent, the DIY fame on the internet marks the intensification of modern celebrity culture.

In this chapter, I approach internet fame by looking into the content of these ordinary faces and asking what they signify against specific social-historical groundings. Modern celebrities' images are built around the themes of success and consumption (Dyer 1998). Their rags-to-riches stories exemplify the American Dream and their luxurious lifestyles celebrate economic affluence and consumerism. Marshall (1997) theorizes that modern celebrity constructs and maintains the discursive linkage between individualism, democracy and consumer capitalism which underscores the social-historical context of the 20th-century Western society. More specifically, celebrity signifies the negotiated dominant cultural identities in a society, rationalizing certain personalities as socially acceptable while marginalizing others.

The conceptualization of modern celebrity's cultural power often directs the polemic to the entertainment and media industries as the gate-keeper in the process of cultural production, helping to maintain the cultural hegemony of the dominant class.

For instance, Dyer suggests that, ‘the primary concern of any attention to Hollywood must be with the dominant ideology of Western society’ (Dyer 1998: 2). Does this ideological function underscoring the cultural power of traditional celebrity still hold true for today’s social media celebrities? Equipped with the new technical affordances for self-representation, can previously marginalized or even subversive cultural identities find a place to blossom on the internet? Also importantly, are we witnessing new forms of subjectivity demanded by the networked society with a globalized digital communication and neoliberal economic order (Castells 2010; Harvey 2007)?

To answer these questions, I will explore the cultural identities and representational patterns of Chinese social media celebrities. I refer to social media celebrity as a personality whose fame is native to social media platforms. This type of public figure in China is called *wanghong*, which can be translated literally as ‘internet red’, a neologism that began to acquire popularity in 2015. The ‘red’ part of this name emphasizes the celebrity’s ability to raise wide public attention and discussion.⁸ I will show how internet reds represent the bottom-up emerging youth identities in China’s online space. They spell out young people’s lived experiences against the globalized neoliberal economy and cultural discourses, as well as sociopolitical normativities in contemporary China. Internet reds can indeed voice the uneasiness of being a young individual that may not be included in mainstream discourses. Nevertheless, this potential to express marginalized voices is not equally distributed according to gender and other forms of social stratification. I shall explain this unbalanced power distribution through the conceptualization of celebrity’s ideological function and the localized post-feminist media culture in China.

Before diving into the analysis, in the next section I shall first discuss the emergence of celebrity culture in contemporary China and then contextualize the recent phenomenon of social media celebrity against China’s youth identities on the internet. As my research questions are related to gender issues and many female internet reds engage with fashion blogging, I then also make reference to the academic discussions on post-feminist media culture and its local manifestation in China.

4.2 Media culture in China

4.2.1 Celebrity in China

In the introductory chapter of the edited volume *Celebrity in China*, the editors Edwards and Jeffreys (2010) point out that the emergence of modern celebrity culture

⁸ See Roberts’ (2010) discussion of Furong Jiejie, an earlier example of internet celebrity in China, whose media representation is constituted by sexually assertive pictures and texts published on blogs and news web portals. In general, any kind of famous social media personality can be regarded as an internet red, since the word is coined retrospectively to describe the phenomenon of internet celebrity since the Web 1.0 era in China.

in China is premised on the basis of a socialist market economy, and the following liberalization of media. The economic reform starting from the late 1970s not only increased individual income but also gave rise to an exuberant consumer society. The industry of mass media and commercial advertising also began to blossom since the 1990s. According to Edwards and Jeffreys (2010), before the economic reform the state-owned media celebrated either political leaders or exemplary socialist citizens such as workers and peasants for their service and contribution to the nation. Along with the rapid socio-economic change, entertainment celebrity stories and tabloid-style formats, thus new forms of public figures, began to proliferate in Chinese media space. The celebrity culture in contemporary China is characterized by the fusion of dominant political ideology with globalized capitalist practices in media and entertainment industries.

Researchers in this volume have emphasized the heterogeneity of the celebrity figures in China's public domain, where we can find for instance the military hero, the outstanding mother, the ethnic minority singer and the transgender dancer. In the introductory chapter, Edwards and Jeffreys suggest that such a celebrity culture can exhibit nostalgia for a highly politicized past, but also introduces new experiences of a more liberal present for audiences. While I am sympathetic with the scholars' interest in how the state appropriates commercial celebrity mechanisms to promote idealized representative figures in various social domains, I suggest that we are now witnessing an even more exuberant entertainment industry compared to the time when the scholars in the volume made their observations. Although exemplary socialist citizens and political leaders are still promoted, entertainment celebrities are marching on to become the dominant public preoccupation. On the one hand, producers' ability to attract high investment and large audiences is turning mainland China into the center of entertainment content production within the Chinese cultural circle. Celebrities whose fame originates from Taiwan and Hong Kong are relocating their careers to the mainland; some has-been actors and actresses are also eager to recycle their fame in TV series and reality shows produced in the mainland. On the other hand, social media technology is developing innovatively and quickly in mainland China. Whereas the scholars in the volume are also expecting to see the possibility of marginalized individuals contributing to new forms of subjectivity with the help of new media technology, in this chapter, I would like to draw attention to a convergent scenario where social media is also instrumental for trumpeting consumerism and the spirit of entertainment.

The discussion on political democracy and media liberalization in the Chinese context may easily bring our focus to propagandistic figures holding up socialist values in state-owned media. However, we need to think about to what extent entertainment is an antithesis to politics. In other words, not being explicitly politicized does not mean being apolitical. From one perspective, the proliferation of entertainment contents in China's public domain may help to displace heavy ideological debates, the function of

which is indeed political. From another perspective, the seemingly mundane and mischievous cultural tropes that emerge on Chinese social media demonstrate how young people engage with and reflect on their lived experience. Therefore, a critical understanding of contemporary celebrity culture in China also requires insights into the entertainment and seemingly politically irrelevant contents.

4.2.2 Chinese youth online identities

One mundane and mischievous cultural form which is prominent online in China is the cultural identity called *diaosi*, which is a scatological online neologism literally referring to pubic hair (Yang, Tang and Wang 2014). Interestingly, this seemingly embarrassing label is identified to by a wide range of people enthusiastically on the internet. Generally, it refers to underprivileged losers (Gao 2013). Cohen (2013) has provided a sociological reading of *diaosi* as those who suffer from the middle-class trap: they are young graduates working in a dead-end job. They cannot save enough money to buy a house and a car, and they are unattractive in the heterosexual marriage market. In media discourses, this identity also covers short, ugly, poor males who are ignored by their dream girls. Yang, Tang and Wang (2014) argue that such pervasive identification with a non-hero identity, is neither overtly political, nor light-hearted entertainment. Instead, *diaosi* is a type of infrapolitics mediating between overt online politics and benign online entertainment. Importantly, it is a means to collective identity making which seeks group solidarity.

Du (2016) in her doctoral dissertation has explored the bottom-up invention of *diaosi* identity as a subcultural practice associated with an emergent precariat class in China. This new social collectivity is one of the results of a globalized neoliberal political and economic order. Du has identified two different types of precariat in China: the migrant workers and the white-collar educated precariat. The first group consists of the peasants who have left their original lands and seek livelihood in cities. They are marginalized and deprived of adequate social welfare services. The second group refers to the educated young graduates, who suffer from diploma inflation and are denied upward mobility into middle class. The online *diaosi* does not correspond to the offline precariat class. Instead, '*diaosi* as an imagined stereotype, allows the precariat to handle their collectively felt frustrations caused by an increasingly rigid and unequal society' (Du 2016: 182). Du argues that in the Chinese mainstream discourses, the precariat class is under-represented, while on the internet we see exuberant cultural productions through memes, pastiche and bricolage. In this way, the Chinese precariat, including the migrant workers and educated white-collars, have formulated an alliance against the power bloc.

While Du's study has provided insightful sociological and also political readings of the *diaosi* identity, this chapter tries to contribute to the discussion through the lens of celebrity culture from the following two perspectives. Firstly, I pay attention to the power relationship within the collectivity of the precariat class. Are migrant workers and educated white-collars represented by celebrity images equally? Secondly, I also

consider the gender perspective of *diaosi* identity. Du's discussion does not explain why this precariat subject who suffers from neoliberal economic and political order is by default a male. She mentions some criteria of being a female *diaosi* which are summarized by social media users (Du 2016: 162), however according to this criteria male *diaosi* signifies the failure of self-realization, whereas female *diaosi* signifies the failure of displaying enough femininity. This popular interpretation thus implies that *diaosi* identity may be a gendered experience.

A bottom-up emerged female identity that has appeared online is *baifumei*, literally referring to the fair-skinned, rich and beautiful girl. Li, Spotti and Kroon (2014) have explored internet users' identification and dis-identification with the *baifumei* identity. They have found that firstly as a key word in Baidu search engine, *baifumei* is used by significantly more male users. Secondly, *baifumei* is not a clear-cut identity. Some users refuse to identify themselves as *baifumei*, while displaying semiotic resources indexing it. This female identity has also undergone a process of semantic blurring, with neither physical beauty nor economic achievements being necessary to credit one as *baifumei*. Thirdly, *baifumei* is stigmatized. These females are believed to utilize their physical beauty in sexual relationships with rich males in exchange for economic favors. Compared to the male loser image of *diaosi*, *baifumei* can be regarded as a successful woman. The glamorous high-achiever archetype reminds us of the globalized post-feminist discourse (McRobbie 2004) and raises our interest to see its localized manifestation in China.

4.2.3 Post-feminist media culture in China

Baifumei's image, with her economic success and physical beauty, is well contained in a post-feminist discourse. In general, post-feminism suggests that 'equality is achieved and feminism is no longer needed' (McRobbie 2004: 255). 'The remaining difference between men and women should be understood as a result of the free exercise of individual choice' (Stuart and Donaghue 2011: 98). High profile or newsworthy achievements of women and girls are considered as the progressive achievement of social and institutional change. Women are now freed from traditional gendered social roles and enter into the public arena based on their independent choice. The emancipatory politics of feminism seems to be out of date, if not raise backlash in popular media. Importantly, a post-feminist discourse takes critiques of feminism into consideration and engages with them actively. Advertisements and popular literature maintain an uncritical relationship with commercially manufactured sexuality and embrace it with the justification of female consent, equality, participation and pleasure.

Another concept related to this post-feminist discourse is female individualization. It means that women are now expected to live a self-monitored and reflexive life, to invest in one's life as a project with plans and constant evaluation. In this sense, the post-feminist subjectivity converges with a neoliberal subjectivity, who is 'autonomous, individualized, self-directing decision-making agent who becomes an entrepreneur of one self, a human capital' (Türken et al. 2015: 33). Negra and Tasker (2014)

summarize these claims in post-feminist culture into three major tropes of post-feminist culture: 'self-fashioning and makeover; women's seeming choice not to occupy high-status public roles; the celebration of sexual expression and affluent femininities' (2014: 1).

Gill (2007) argues that the post-feminist discourse of empowerment and taking control makes women internalize the objectifying gaze and identify with a dominant femininity as their free choice. Agency and autonomy are not only believed as having been achieved, but also need to be expressed explicitly. For instance, the neoliberal femininity entails that women's that their dating and sexual practices are freely chosen, regardless of how much they stick to conservative and traditional gender values. In this sense, the imperative self-narration of autonomy and agency avoids the question about the relationship between media representation, social constitution and subjectivity. It simply disavows any potential constraints and inequality. Gill's theorization is very insightful for my analysis on the heterogeneous physical image of female internet reds in China.

Following McRobbie's (2014) and Gill's (2007) line of argument, media and celebrity researchers have explored how fashion and beauty practices contribute to the discourse of post-feminism in the public sphere. Stuart and Donaghue (2011) argue that 'the promise of women's liberation and freedom of self-choice are overwhelmingly packaged within the crushingly cruel beauty images that western women are judged against and incited to emulate' (2011: 99). In other words, even if women's agency is not solely realized through feminized beauty and fashion consumption behaviors, the bottom line is that femininity should not suffer at the expense of self-realization and career. Consequently, beauty practices which prioritize prevailing ideas of femininity are naturalized as an unproblematic expression of the autonomous, self-regulating and self-choosing feminine subject (Stuart and Donaghue 2011: 117). From an economic perspective, Smith (2009) points out that post-feminism is directly related to a series of economic bubbles in property, credit and commodities markets defining the first ten years of the 21st century. It is in such an economic scenario where females are relentlessly represented as upscale female consumers.

While post-feminist discourse is prominent in the affluent West, it also has its localized manifestation in China's public space due to media globalization. Thornham and Feng (2010) have explored the issue of individualism, post-feminism and subjectivity by analyzing the Chinese versions of globally distributed fashion magazines, and female readers' reactions towards them. They have identified a slightly different shape of post-feminism compared to McRobbie's characterization of fashion magazines in Britain. According to them, the self-reflexive and self-conscious uptake of the critique of feminism is not prominent in Chinese fashion magazines, where female images embrace a passive and conventional femininity with much less trouble. However, from the interview data, Thornham and Feng find that the readers do not unreflexively identify with the unrealistic female images. Instead, the readers think physical beauty and luxury products presented in the magazines are desirable, and they will achieve them

through hard work and self-determination. We can see in such an interpretation female passivity cast into the background. The discourses of self-actualization, individualism and professionalism which are believed to be the way to upscale consumption behaviors are enacted to bring back the agency and power of females. In line with Gill's (2007) findings, modern femininity in China is constructed with essentialised sexual differences, correcting the gender policy of the Mao era which tried to erase gender differences. Such an emphasis on femininity is compatible with Western consumerism, registering woman's empowerment under feminized consumption practices.

4.3 Data collection

Thinking about the concept of internet red, I was facing an ocean of names and faces. A map or orientation is needed to figure out where internet reds are located and what vehicles they use in their media representation. Fortunately, the annual Sina Weibo Internet Red Convention provided me with such information.⁹ The convention categorizes internet reds based on their monetization models. A set of awards consisting of 13 different prizes are given to the top-10 most popular and top-10 rising stars in each category. A preliminary observation of this list reveals that all the popular fashion microbloggers are female and seven out of ten rising star video creators are male. I will discuss this pattern in detail in the next section. Following this distributional pattern, for a female personality, I have selected Zhang Dayi, 'best fashion microblogger of 2016'. For a male personality, I have selected the second-place 'rising video star' Zhang Quandan. This is because Zhang Dayi is one of the most successful beauty and fashion microbloggers, and Zhang Quandan is accentuated exuberantly with his personality and embodied images, which is in accordance with the object of this case study to investigate the cultural identities of internet reds.

As discussed in the methodology chapter, fame is meant to be disseminated into different locales and taken up in various contexts. To a certain extent, the successful monetization of an internet red's content depends on the mobility of one's fame. Therefore, I agree with Marcus's (1995) argument of adopting ethnography to 'examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects and identities in diffuse time-space' (1995: 96, cited from Hine 2000). Zhang Dayi uses her Weibo account as one of the main sites to maintain an audience. To monetize such online attention, she drives the audience traffic from Weibo to her Taobao web shops, where the audience can purchase the same products she displays in her Weibo pictures.¹⁰ In this case, my research field was constructed by following this traffic from Zhang Dayi's Weibo account to her Taobao web shops.

⁹ <http://tech.sina.com.cn/i/2016-05-19/doc-afxsktkp8973754.shtml>, viewed on 16 June 2017.

¹⁰ Zhang Dayi's Weibo account: http://www.weibo.com/u/1549362863?topnav=1&wvr=6&topsug=1&is_hot=1, viewed on 16 June 2017.

However, a social media platform is a bounded space in the sense that it has its niche audience group, specialized sociability and unique cultural atmosphere in the ecology of social media industry. My movement around these two sites may coincide with Zhang Dayi's target audience, young females who follow her fashion advices and buy clothes from her shop. If a celebrity's image is a location for the negotiation of cultural identity, we may also expect this image to be taken up by different audience groups. Therefore, I also searched with Zhang Dayi's name on the search engine Baidu to observe the uptake of her celebrity image in news reports.¹¹ In this way, I also discovered a short documentary film made by Alibaba which sets Zhang Dayi as the representative figure of the Chinese internet reds and narrates her career path as a celebrity online.¹² In this film, I found she also made a music video dedicated to her fans. The music video crystallizes her celebrity brand image and functions as a manifesto of her identity. In this case, my research field of multiple sites was constructed while I followed the traces of Zhang Dayi's image from her Weibo account to Taobao web shops; and from documentary films to music videos. It was along this trajectory that I received new knowledge and made myself familiar with this celebrity figure and related discussions around her.

The main method for me to collect the data was observation. The time-frame of my field work was from 16th June 2017 to 8th July 2017. I read Zhang Dayi's Weibo updates from the past one year, and browsed her three web shops. On these sites, I considered the pictures and texts she posted as my data. I took screenshots of the pictures and texts and saved them on local disc. For the documentary film, I mainly focused on Zhang Dayi's own narrative of her experience. The parts that are important to my analysis were transcribed. In the music video, both the lyrics, settings and Zhang Dayi's embodied images were observed closely. I have downloaded the video, transcribed the lyrics and took screenshots of the relevant scenes.

Zhang Quandan began to acquire public attention in the parody news program *Rage Comic Big Event*.¹³ He features in the pseudo-interviews of the program. The videos are distributed officially and unofficially on several platforms including Weibo. I noticed that the videos also make reference to Zhang Quandan's Weibo account.

Zhang Dayi's Taobao web shop: https://bigeve8.taobao.com/?spm=a1z10.1-c-s.0.0.56d845a0oTuNSq&ali_trackid=42_25aecce6043f553b3ae21b63e05c4f56, viewed on 16 June 2017.

¹¹ Baidu is the largest Chinese search engine in the world owned by Baidu Inc. Similar to Google, the company provides multiple services such as advertising, video, forum, and news besides the search engine website. <http://www.baidu.com/>, viewed on 1 November 2017.

¹² Alibaba is China's largest E-commerce company, and world's largest retailer. It is the parent company of marketplace Taobao and Tmall. Many web shops on Alibaba's marketplace Taobao and Tmall are in cooperation with famous internet reds. <https://world.taobao.com/>, <https://www.tmall.com/>, viewed on 4 July 2017.

¹³ <http://baozoumanhua.com/>, viewed on 17 June 2017.

Therefore, I followed him from the videos to his Weibo account.¹⁴ I then read his microblog posts dating back to one year ago. I found that Zhang also appeared in online advertisements. These advertisements, both video and images, were critical data for my study since celebrity is the 'idol of consumption' (Dyer and McDonnald 1998). In advertisements, a celebrity's cultural identity is foregrounded so as to reach out to the target audience-consumer. In total, I have watched 15 comic videos and 6 video advertisements. To capture the data, I took screenshots of the microblog posts and advertisements, and downloaded the videos. As internet red culture has become a fiercely debated topic in China's online space, I was curious about how the public interprets this phenomenon in general. Therefore, I searched with the key word 'internet red' and 'internet host' on Baidu and NetEase news app.¹⁵ The online news articles and user comments helped me to contextualize the cultural form of internet red against wider social discussions.

4.4 The internet red landscape

Sina Weibo Internet Red Convention is a media and industrial event bringing platforms, social media celebrities and commercial cultural intermediaries together. After weeks of panel discussions and competitions, the convention culminates at an award ceremony with a red-carpet show. This convention not only further publicizes the concept of internet red in China's online space, but also delineates a landscape of internet reds through its award lists. The convention classifies celebrity figures into video content creators, fashion microbloggers and internet live streaming hosts. We may note that this categorization is based on a celebrity's monetization model, instead of the locale and vehicle of their media presence. Most internet reds now maintain multiple social media accounts so as to broadcast their media images consistently and seamlessly.

Interestingly, there is a gendered pattern in the distribution of celebrity personalities among the different categories. In the top-10 most popular video content creators, eight of them are males; in the top-10 rising video stars, male celebrities take seven places. Most of them film humorous or satirical content and some creators feature pet videos or movie commentaries. In contrast, in the top-10 most popular fashion and beauty microbloggers, all of them are female personalities. This distribution suggests that fashion and beauty related content is predominantly represented through female identities in China's online space. We may understand this gendered landscape from the following perspectives. First of all, beauty and fashion practice is

¹⁴ Zhang Quandan's Weibo account, http://weibo.com/u/5300636312?refer_flag=1001030101_is_hot=1

¹⁵ NetEase news app is a Chinese news aggregation mobile phone application. Among other functionalities, users can leave comments to the news they read. <http://www.163.com/newsapp/>, viewed on 6 December 2017.

considered as a female preoccupation according to traditional gender values in China. Secondly, an exuberant commodity market, if not the commodity market bubble, contributes to media's representation of women as feminized consumers (Smith 2009). Last but not least, the vital e-commerce industry instantiated by Taobao web shops seeks 'idols of consumption' in the form of fashion bloggers to personify the online consumption experience.

There is also a gendered pattern of embodied images. In fashion and beauty internet reds' content, the emphasis is on the expression of an embodied and authentic self. In contrast, male internet reds prioritize scripted or commentary videos where their embodied self is not the focus. Some of them may only feature their pets on screen or wear masks or costumes in the videos. Even at offline conventions, they do not reveal their faces to the public (Figure 4.1).¹⁶ In this case, we not only see female celebrity's association with embodied image, but also the deliberate disassociation of body image by male celebrities. In the next section, I shall analyze two celebrity personalities in detail. The analysis will show the different forms of sociohistorical situatedness of male and female celebrities, and the youth identities they represent and negotiate.



Figure 4.1 Internet reds convention top-10 video content creators

¹⁶ <http://weibo.com/ttarticle/p/show?id=2309403988530127882240>, data retrieved on 16 June 2017.

4.5 The gendered experience of neoliberalism

4.5.1 Female internet red as the glamorous high-achiever

Fashion blogger Zhang Dayi is a former commercial model. Although she has appeared on mainstream fashion magazines, her name did not become widely known until she relocated her career to online space. She won the best Weibo fashion internet red award in 2016 at Sina Internet Red Convention. Zhang Dayi now maintains a Weibo account of more than five million followers. There are also three web shops on Taobao.com that are branded by her personality, including a clothing shop, a lingerie shop and a lipstick shop. Being tall, slim and fair-skinned, she meets the dominant aesthetic standard of female beauty in China (Thornham and Feng 2010). As her lucrative web shop business also brings significant income,¹⁷ she can be regarded as an example of *baifumei* (Li, Spotti and Kroon 2014). *Baifumei* is a post-feminist subject *par excellence*, which unites both economic success and physical beauty. In McRobbie's (2004) words, this identity is illustrated by the archetype of 'glamorous high-achiever'.

On her Weibo account, Zhang Dayi constantly uploads pictures, where she showcases clothes and lipsticks that can be purchased in her web shops. Accompanying each update, she also introduces fashion tips or explains the features of the products such as their color or fabric. As live streaming platforms began to acquire popularity in China since 2016, Zhang Dayi also displays products in live videos, thus being able to communicate synchronically with viewers on the specifics of the products. Here we may compare the content created by Zhang Dayi to that of YouTube fashion and beauty vloggers. In Chapter 5, I shall show that constant disclosure and confession of private information is a way for YouTubers to establish affiliative relationships with viewers. However, in Zhang Dayi's microblogs, any life experience, story or anecdote is absent. Instead, her contents foreground embodied images, her web shop sales and product information. For most of the pictures and selfies posted, there is no explanation about where she is located and what she is doing in settings appearing to be fancy vacation sites (Figure 4.2 and Figure 4.3).¹⁸ The salient message is that she is wearing beautiful clothes and is taking photos in front of beautiful backgrounds. In this case, it may be argued that Zhang Dayi's media representation on her Weibo account is stripped of its sociohistorical context, and composed of constant flows of images. This scenario echoes Johnston's (1973) finding of female roles in early Hollywood films where the images of women tend to be ahistorical apart from some modification of

¹⁷ A general discussion of the economy of China's internet red available at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ywang/2017/01/26/superstar-influencers-chinas-internet-celebrities-at-heart-of-alibabas-growth/#4247ad162c98>, viewed on 23 June 2017.

¹⁸ Source for Figure 4.2: https://weibo.com/1549362863/F6xkC11uk?filter=hot&root_comment_id=0&type=comment#_rnd1509548067141, data retrieved on 20 June 2017. Source for Figure 4.3: https://weibo.com/1549362863/F6qAMbMXI?filter=hot&root_comment_id=0&type=comment#_rnd1509548301656, data retrieved on 20 June 2017.

fashion, compared to male characters who are more individuated and situated against a specific sociohistorical background.



Figure 4.2 Zhang Dayi showcases clothes



Figure 4.3 Zhang Dayi showcases clothes

It is in a documentary film featuring Zhang Dayi as the representative figure of Chinese internet celebrity where we see her celebrity storyline unfold.¹⁹ This film is made by Alibaba, China's largest online marketplace company and also the world's largest retailer. Zhang Dayi's business success is one of the central topics in the film. She mentions that she is proud of her career, because whereas in the past she was a model to be casted by customers, she now manages her own business and hires other models. She also admits that she can be regarded as a rich person in China. However, Zhang Dayi acknowledges that fans and followers may start to like her merely based on a picture. Such public attention that she can get from displaying a good appearance is short-lived. The only way to maintain repeatedly returning and engaged audiences is to provide good services for them, in this case, fashionable clothes and good style advice. In this narrative, Zhang Dayi is aware of the feminist critique of women as an aesthetic object and she also believes it as an undesirable scenario. Here the problem is solved through professionalism. By foregrounding her role as a fashion opinion leader, she is legitimizing her fame which relies on media representation with career achievement.

Zhang Dayi has also filmed a music video titled *The Dresses Are Sold Out*, in which she is the singer of the song.²⁰ This music video, published on her Weibo account and web shops further brands her celebrity image. The video features her walking happily on the streets of London and enjoying her life moments with confidence and joy (Figure 4.4 to Figure 4.7).²¹ Again, these images are devoid of context. We know she is in London according to the signs and buildings in the settings. But an audience without any knowledge of Zhang Dayi may not understand who she is and what she is doing.



Figure 4.4 Zhang Dayi walking on a street in London

¹⁹ Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_nEFzKmElFc&t=669s, data retrieved on 20 June 2017.

²⁰ Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cyNaaACTQFg>, data retrieved on 20 June 2017.

²¹ Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_nEFzKmElFc&t=669s, data retrieved on 20 June 2017.



Figure 4.5 Zhang Dayi walking on another street with another outfit



Figure 4.6 A setting of a street corner in London



Figure 4.7 Zhang Dayi is holding a board with her name on it

Table 4.1 The lyrics of ‘The dresses are sold out’

美好的东西永远不会嫌多
女生的衣橱为下一件空着
每天的造型如何跟心情配合
就是我最喜欢的娱乐
成熟或单纯哪种最适合
开心打扮为自己不为别人
迎着风走出门人们又回头了

因为我有我的风格
我勇于创造自己的风格
美的就是对的
为美丽而生做最独特的女生
晴天雨天都要让自己快乐

我装扮我的青春我坚持我的选择
对世界微笑吧就会有好事发生
好好爱自己就会有好事发生
相信我自己就会有好事发生
换一件新衣就会有好事发生
就让我展开双翼向未来飞奔

Good stuff is never enough,
A girl's closet is always waiting for the next piece.
My outfit of the day goes along with my mood,
This is my favorite entertainment.
Being mature or innocent, which style suits me best?
Fashioning myself happily not for others but for myself.
I walk out of the door against the wind, people turn
their head around,
This is because I have my own style.
I am brave enough to create my own style.
Being beautiful is being correct.
Born to be pretty, be the most unique girl.
Whether it rains or is sunny, I always make myself
happy.
I fashion my youth, I insist on my choice.
Smile to the world, then good things will happen.
Love myself, then good things will happen.
Believe in myself, then good things will happen
Change a piece of clothes, then good things will happen
Let me open my wings and fly to the future.

Rap verse, male voice

She's that magazine face.
让我窒息美的冒泡泡
从头到脚穿过的东西都变 famous
天真的微笑有多 contagious
像花一样的你七里飘香
绽放野蝴蝶纷飞

She's that magazine face.
Her beauty makes me hold my breath.
What she wears will become famous
Her innocent smile is so contagious
You look like flowers, the aroma wafts into air.
Like a wild butterfly flits around.

Zhang Dayi's verse

梦在催促着心在跳动着
想不要不小心颠倒众生
那就跟着我一起去探索
寻找你最美的可能

My dream urges me, my heart beats.
Do you want your beauty to be admired by the world?
Then follow me to explore and
Search for the most beautiful you.

Through self-narration, the lyrics (Table 4.1) portray a converged post-feminist subject and a psychological subject demanded by neoliberalism (Gill 2017).²² In the beginning, girls are described stereotypically as being obsessed with consumption, since ‘their closets are always waiting for the next piece of clothes’. This reminds us how the commodity market preaches consumerism by creating upscale and affluent female customer images (Smith 2009). Then this obsession with buying clothes and fashioning the self is justified as a way to please oneself instead of others. In this way, the feminist criticism of women’s labor invested on body and image maintenance is mitigated by a discourse of self-pleasure and hedonism, because this ‘is my favorite entertainment’. Moreover, fashion practice is presented as a location for self-expression, because she is ‘brave to choose her own style’, ‘to be the unique self’. Here we can identify the notions of individualism, autonomy and choice constituting post-feminist media culture.

Moreover, like for this happily singing and dancing girl facing the camera, a neoliberal subjectivity is required to be reflexive about one’s choice and to express explicitly that one can choose. The song therefore functions as a choice biography. Similar to Gill’s (2007) analysis of dating advice in fashion magazines, in the modernized and neoliberal version of femininity, it is imperative to present one’s dating and sexual practices as freely chosen (2007: 154). This neoliberal subjectivity is self-monitored and self-managed. Good things will happen, if a girl loves herself, smiles to the world, or even simply changes into a piece of new clothes. It suggests that any problem can be solved if women take action in their own initiative. Of course, the lyrics do not tell us whether women’s agentic power can conquer social and institutional constraints or whether they had better just ignore them through the supposedly free choices in fashion and beauty styles.

In the lyrics, we can also discern the shift from objectification to subjectification characterizing the post-feminist media culture (Gill 2007). Zhang Dayi fashions herself not to please others but for the sake of her own happiness. On the street, people turn their heads to look at her, but this is also because she has her unique style to attract others’ attention. Also importantly, fashion and beauty practices appear to be the resources that empower her to do so. In other words, she is an empowered and active subject who can attract people’s attention. In this sense, Zhang Dayi is not presented straightforwardly as an aesthetic object, but someone ‘who chose to present herself in a seemingly objectified manner’ (Goldman 1992, cited from Gill 2007: 151).

Nevertheless, I argue that the lyrics demonstrate a localized discursive trajectory of internalizing the objectifying gaze compared to its counterpart in a Western context. ‘Being beautiful is being correct’, may look like a bold attack on the ‘seemingly tyrannical regime of feminist puritanism’ (McRobbie 2004: 259). But situating this verse against the traditional gender normativity and the development of feminism in China,

²² Source: http://www.kuwo.cn/geci/I_9943389, data retrieved on 20 June 2017.

I argue that the subtext sounds more like 'being beautiful is no longer sinful or superficial'. The song is also inserted with a few rap verses in a male voice, which appreciates the girl's beauty. But this is not a message with an ironic relief, like 'thank goodness it is permissible, once again, to enjoy looking at the bodies of beautiful women', as discovered in the Wonderbra advertisement (McRobbie 2004: 259). This is a more direct and unproblematic embrace of the male gaze, since the self-reflexive and self-conscious uptake of the critique of feminism in China is not as prominent as that in Western countries (Thornham and Feng 2010).

In other words, the male gaze has never been a prominent controversy in Chinese media discourse. If it is controversial, according to the traditional values, it is women's problem, because they intentionally attract the male gaze like a siren. The post-feminist culture helps to replace the stigmatization in this intention with celebration. Zhang Dayi's case demonstrates that there seems to be a leap in the development of feminist sensitivities in China's media discourse. While the feminist critique of traditional gender normativity has not yet blossomed, a globalized neoliberal economic order already introduces post-feminist culture into China. This may explain what I will show below that female internet reds still encounter conservative and sexist comments.

The post-feminist discourse invites women and girls to become a particular kind of self. In the video, Zhang Dayi expresses that she is indeed very lucky, because her appearance belongs to the 'sweet and soft type', which is the most welcomed female image in China. In her opinion, cool style or Goth fashion may not acquire popularity in China. On the one hand, Zhang's claim is in line with Johansson's (2001) observation about the hegemonic femininity in China which emphasizes essentialised female characteristics such as being soft and gentle. On the other hand, she also reveals that only the women who resemble the dominant feminine image are empowered with agency.

Seeing this radical and westernized declaration of female individualism, one may wonder to what extent this discourse is compatible with the dominant ideology which prioritizes collectivism in China. Firstly, contemporary China is well contained in a globalized neoliberal economic order, where individuality in the labor market is already spelt out prominently (Standing 2011; Du 2016). Zhang Dayi's image of a successful female entrepreneur goes along with the mainstream discourse which appeals for young people to start their own business with innovation and entrepreneurship.²³ Secondly, Zhang Dayi's assertion of individuality is only achieved through feminized consumption practices, which threatens neither dominant political ideology nor traditional family beliefs. On the contrary, this non-threatening individualism is compatible with China's economic scenario where great emphasis is given to drive the demands in the domestic consumer market.

²³ An explanation of the strategy 'mass entrepreneurship and innovation' by Development Research Center of the State Council of the PRC, http://en.drc.gov.cn/2016-04/07/content_24350321.htm, viewed on 7 July 2017.

To summarize, Zhang Dayi's *baifumei* identity is a neoliberal subjectivity and contained in the post-feminist discourse which portrays young females as free agents whose lifestyle is expressive and individualistic, who are able to enter social domains (in this case business) which used to be exclusive for males. Zhang Dayi is the 'glamorous high-achiever' who appears to be a beneficiary of the exuberant IT industry and other progressive social and institutional changes after China being included in a globalized neoliberal economic order. Nevertheless, the consumption-enabled individualism not only traps females into the hegemonic femininity as 'innocent and sweet' girls represented in Zhang Dayi's music video, but also provides them a delusion of agency and choice which may still be difficult in both family life and labor market.

4.5.2 Male internet red as the underprivileged loser

Having explored Zhang Dayi's glamorous high-achiever image, now we examine a fictional figure called Zhang Quandan, who first appeared in the famous internet parody news broadcast called *Rage Comic Big Event*.²⁴ Among other content, the program pseudo-interviews Zhang Quandan in a factory setting (Figure 4.8).²⁵ Zhang is a quality inspector working on the assembly line in one of the biggest electronic contract manufacturers. At the beginning of every interview, he introduces himself as an assembly line worker. In 2016, Zhang Quandan received the award of TOP-10 rising star video content creator at the Weibo Internet Red Convention. Interestingly, it was the factory worker in the story rather than the actor who is awarded the prize (Figure 4.9).²⁶ He also appears in several advertisements where he endorses products as a factory boy. In this sense, I argue that when this male internet red appears online, he is clearly defined against the sociohistorical context in contemporary China. The identity of an assembly line worker indexes young people from rural areas who barely finish secondary education. They neither see career opportunities as a farmer like their parent's generation due to the meager income, nor in occupations requiring higher education due to the disadvantaged educational resources in rural areas. So, they become migrant workers with temporary contracts in factories. In this sense, Zhang Quandan belongs to the precariat class in China (Standing 2011; Du 2016).

²⁴ Source: <http://baozoumanhua.com/videos/12563314>, viewed on 17 June 2017.

²⁵ Source: <http://baozoumanhua.com/videos/12563314>, data retrieved on 17 June 2017.

²⁶ Source: http://weibo.com/5300636312/DzgvAtXmC?from=page_1005055300636312_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#_rnd1503414299500, data retrieved on 17 June 2017.



Figure 4.8 Zhang Quandan introduces himself in the video



Figure 4.9 Zhang Quandan's poster of attending the internet red convention

However, despite of the reality of being at the bottom of the social ladder, Zhang Quandan is proud of his company as having 'leadership in the IT field' and as 'an international enterprise', stated in the video directly in English by himself. He strives to present himself in the videos as a member of the elite, but always makes a fool of himself due to his inadequate cultural resources. The sense of humor is achieved through a mismatch between his migrant worker job and his self-identification as an IT industry professional, as well as his failed display of cultural capital. For example, he has both English and French (full) names, but they are hilarious ones as 'Michael Jack' and 'Hélodie Jacqueline'.²⁷ In the video, he constantly code-switches between Chinese and English, but his Chinese is heavily accented and his English ungrammatical. Zhang also comments on the contemporary mobile phone industry. Interestingly, in

²⁷ Michael Jack are two first names and Hélodie Jacqueline are female names in French.

contrast to his flimsy English, these comments are pertinent and sharp. For instance, he points out the celebritization of entrepreneurs in China and criticizes the Chinese mobile phone industry for focusing too much on marketing instead of technology innovation and product quality. By means of satire and irony, he reveals some inconvenient truths about the IT industry.

Based on Zhang Quandan's failed self-presentation as a member of the IT elite but his indeed pertinent and professional critiques, I argue that Zhang Quandan's image is polycentric (Blommaert 2010), or in Dyer's words shows 'structured polysemy' (Dyer 1998), which conflates migrant worker and educated white-collar identity into one personality. On the one hand, his assembly line job and failed performance of linguistic competence indexes the identity of a migrant worker. On the other hand, his opinion of China's IT industry and fluent use of mobile phone industry lingo index the identity of educated young professionals, for instance the programmers in IT companies. Moreover, the sense of humor in Zhang Quandan's story may only be understood by an audience who has some professional knowledge of the IT circle or at least can tell that Michael Jack and H  lodie Jacqueline as names are attempts at humor.

According to Du (2016), migrant workers and educated white-collars in China all belong to the precariat class. Through an imagined collective identity of *diaosi*, as the underprivileged losers, they form an alliance which challenges the dominant power bloc made up by the elite class. Following this line of argument, I suggest that Zhang Quandan crystallizes the *diaosi* identity representations. While Du has demonstrated how the alliance of the precariat class forms, here we may explore the power relationship within this alliance, between the educated white-collars and migrant workers. Besides appearing in the parody news broadcast, Zhang Quandan also has a Weibo account. On this account, both the actor and the character in the story speak under the name of Zhang Quandan. Sometimes, the microblog update is composed in the voice of the actor. The actor Lai Yuheng is a script writer and actor for Rage Comics, who has obtained a BA degree in journalism at Guangdong University of Technology. However, this personal identity is seldom publicized.

From one perspective, we see the conflated identity of *diaosi*. Zhang's followers actively contribute to this identification by bringing out the question 'As a *diaosi*, how can you become a top one and the one that brings hope to the *diaosi* population?' Zhang Quandan also represents a *diaosi* lifestyle by endorsing all kinds of affordable products such as snacks and mobile phone games. Moreover, Zhang's image is deliberately contrasted to *diaosi*'s rival *gaofushuai*, the socially privileged rich and good-looking man. In an advertisement for Lays potato chips, Zhang Quandan's dream girl mistakes him for one of the most famous male celebrities in China after eating the magic chip at a set-up date and thus marries him (Figure 4.10 to Figure 4.12).²⁸ At every moment of life crisis, the potato chip gives the girl the belief that her husband is

²⁸ Source for Figure 4.10 to Figure 4.14 <https://v.qq.com/x/cover/tf610shek71hqik.html?vid=t03135ond9d>, data retrieved on 17 June 2017.

the celebrity. Zhang Quandan himself would like to maintain his wife's illusion by continuously giving her potato chips (Figure 4.13). After the film ends, the girl is casted again in a date scene and the time is reset. This time when her date takes off the bag from his head, it turns out that he is the celebrity (Figure 4.14).

In this advertisement, Zhang Quandan's *diaosi* identity is constructed by his performance of dis-identification. Studies on the dynamic online semiotic practices have explored how identity can be performed through identification and disidentification (e.g. Leppänen et al. 2014; Kytölä 2017). One of the strategies is to mock and satire the object to be distanced. For instance, Leppänen et al. (2014) have shown how Finnish web forum users play with a meme of the words of a misspelled tattoo, which accumulates to a disidentification with the practice of tattooing lifestyle slogans, and considering it as socially inferior. However, in the case of Zhang Quandan, we see self-mockery, a strategy often adopted in the semiotic practice of *diaosi*. He is not attractive, not the ideal date, not a *gaofushuai* like the celebrity; nevertheless, he is the reality that most of his audience lives. Most importantly, the self-mockery is a way to expose the *diaosi* experience as an experience of underprivilege, a social problem. We may understand the script as both a helpless acceptance of reality, and a polemic self-assertion.



Figure 4.10 Zhang Quandan and his dream girl at a set-up date

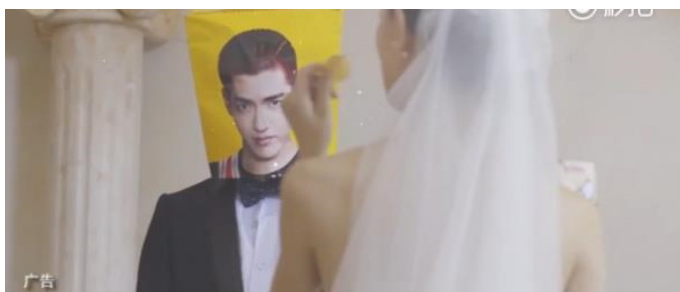


Figure 4.11 The girl marries Zhang Quandan after mistaking him as the celebrity



Figure 4.12 Zhang Quandan and his dream girl live an illusion of a happy life



Figure 4.13 Zhang Quandan constantly gives the girl potato chips



Figure 4.14 The girl's date is indeed the celebrity!

While Zhang Quandan's conflated *diaosi* identity of migrant worker and educated young professional are contrasted with the *gaofushuai*, we also see discordance within this image on Zhang's Weibo account. It can be recognized that sometimes it is the actor who speaks in his microblog. For instance, as an entertainment industry professional, he likes to comment on foreign films and TV series. On 5th January 2017, when the latest season of *Sherlock* was aired on BBC, he posted a picture of John and Mary Watson, commenting on both the plot in the series and the actor and actress's breakup

in real life (Figure 4.15).²⁹ He also reposted one episode of *Rage Comic Big Event*, which satires the UK's withdrawal from the EU (Figure 4.16.).³⁰ In these microblogs, the identity of a well-informed and well-educated white-collar pops out under Zhang Quandan's name. The play with cultural taste does not end with displaying knowledge of British TV series and international political news. In one microblog, the actor parodies 'Shamate style' and uses Martian language to compose the microblog (Figure 4.17).³¹ This set of semiotic resources indexes the sub-culture of the alienated young migrant workers,³² who are criticized in popular discourses for being vulgar, ignorant and lacking education. I suggest that in these microblog entries, an identity of an educated white-collar is dissociated from the identity of a migrant worker.



Figure 4.15 Zhang Quandan comments on the latest season of *Sherlock*
(Translation: The breakup separated them in real life, death separated them in the show)

²⁹ Source: http://weibo.com/5300636312/EpoO1o6BS?from=page_1005055300636312_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#_rnd1503414663073, data retrieved on 17 June 2017.

³⁰ Source: http://weibo.com/5300636312/DCY7twmUr?from=page_1005055300636312_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment, data retrieved on 17 June 2017.

³¹ Source: https://weibo.com/5300636312/E7lURi7iD?filter=hot&root_comment_id=0, data retrieved on 17 June 2017.

³² Shamate is an ironic transliteration of 'smart' in Chinese. It is a subculture of fashion and a series of online semiotic practices marked by exaggerated Goth makeup and Japanese visual kei fashion. Shamate style is often adopted by blue-collar kids from rural areas in China. A discussion of this subculture, sensitivity and its social formation can be accessed at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/12/02/vanity-fail/>, data retrieved on 7 July. Martian language is a type of heterotrophy Chinese character which combines and rebuilds Chinese and Japanese characters, pinyin and Arabic numbers. From the early 2000s, Martian language began to be adopted by Chinese kids of the post-1990 generation, who would like to assert their own cultural formation in the online space and avoid their parents' surveillance. This internet code is thus often associated with the stereotype of disobedient and naïve adolescent. Further information can be referred from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martian_language, data retrieved on 12 October 2017.



Figure 4.16 Zhang Quandan reposts and comments on a video satirizing Brexit
(Translation: The mouth is so awesome)



Figure 4.17 Zhang Quandan parodies shamate style
(Translation: Love is like two people stretching a rubber band. The one who does not let go always gets hurt)

However, as a famous comic actor and script writer, Zhang Quandan or Lai Yuheng in this case, still feels uneasy about his social circumstances and constantly confesses his feelings on Weibo. For him, it is stressful to maintain social ties and pay his mortgage (Figure 4.18).³³ After one year's hard work, he is not satisfied with his achievement.

³³ Source: https://weibo.com/5300636312/EI4jt4l7M?filter=hot&root_comment_id=0, data retrieved on 17 June 2017.

He supposes this situation is applicable to most people in China (Figure 4.19).³⁴ In these blogs, we see a white-collar with a decent job, who albeit having passion and competence, feels stressed due to the fierce social competition and difficult social environment. These microblog entries epitomize young people's lived experiences in contemporary urbanizing and industrializing China, where the struggle and frustration experienced in the neoliberal economic order and job market can be only comforted by community and family ties. In line with Du's (2016) argument, it is such a sense of struggle and frustration that brings the assembly line worker and the actor together into one image of *diaosi* Zhang Quandan.

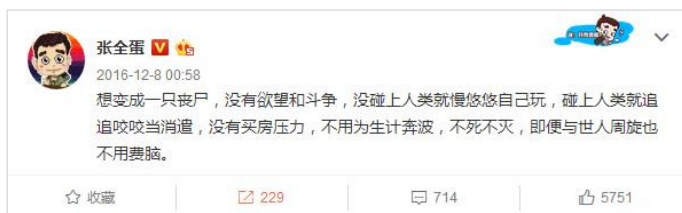


Figure 4.18 Zhang Quandan confesses his stressful life

(Translation: I would like to become a zombie who doesn't have desire nor struggle. If I don't encounter human beings, I can play with myself. If I encounter them, I then run after them and bite them just for fun. In this way, I don't have the pressure to buy a house, don't have to exert every effort to earn a living. I don't die nor live. Although I need to deal with people, it's not that tiring mentally)

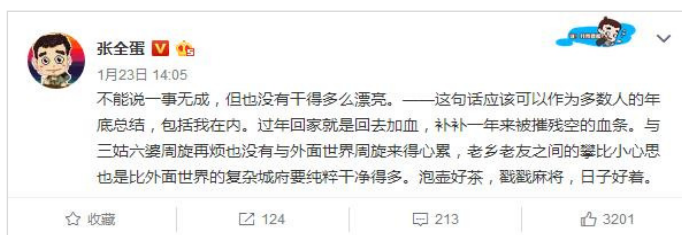


Figure 4.19 Zhang Quandan feels underachieved

(Translation: Not achieving nothing, but neither great success. I believe this can summarize many people's lives at the end of a year, including me. Going back home for the spring festival is to add fuel that has been used up by the struggles in the past year. Dealing with relatives is not as stressful as dealing with the social world. Even the envious comparison among old friends is purer than the experience in the social world. Make a good pot of tea, play some mahjong, the life is still good)

³⁴ Source: https://weibo.com/5300636312/Es97HAGnh?filter=hot&root_comment_id=0&type=comment, data retrieved on 17 June 2017.

Nevertheless, in this *diaosi* collectivity, the author is the educated professional and the audiences who have the cultural resources to discern the sense of mischievousness are also educated professionals. In contrast, the assembly line worker, working with least added value in the IT industry chain, is ridiculed, parodied and laughed at on the screen. In this sense, Zhang Quandan's *diaosi* image not only functions as a magic alliance, but also a reconciliation which naturalizes the domination of the knowledge-based workers over the unskilled laborers.

4.5.3 'There's no such thing as male internet red'

I have already proposed that there exists a gendered representation of male and female internet reds in China's online space. While the glamorous young women achieve career success in fashion and beauty industries, the frustrated young men make fun of themselves in comic videos. In this section, I explore the discursive battleground between genders. I will show that female internet red culture is stigmatized in the performance of *diaosi* identity, revealing that the gendered experience of being a young individual in contemporary China is more than a simple matter of being different but also unequal.

One feature of *diaosi*'s identity performance is sexist discourse (Du 2016: 172), which is also very prominent in Zhang Quandan's pseudo-interview videos. Zhang Quandan's job is to inspect the quality of mobile phones before they are delivered to the market. As the pronunciation of the word 'gadget' in Chinese is the same as that of the word 'whore', Zhang Quandan constantly uses this pun and sex-related off-color jokes to personify the mobile phones. In other words, females are objectified as mobile phones that are used and owned by males. He also constantly jokes about male homosexuality. For instance, when he controlled the quality of curved TV sets, he believed these TVs were sold to gay men because they were 'curved', another pun implying 'non-straight' in Chinese.

In one video, Zhang Quandan was asked to comment on his status as an internet red.³⁵ He then summarized several criteria for being an internet red. According to Zhang, a girl needs to have a very sharp jaw line and deep cleavage. The jaw line is so sharp that once she lowers her head, the jaw punctures her breasts. Her makeup needs to be heavy to the extent that not even her mother could recognize her. Firstly, in Zhang Quandan's idea, internet red by default is female. As he asserted: 'there's no such thing as male internet red, only female internet red and sissy-man internet red.'³⁶ Secondly, he believes the only requirement for someone to become an internet red is one's appearance. And the features of this appearance, implied by the exaggerated description of the punctured breast, are achieved artificially through plastic surgery.

³⁵ Source: <https://v.qq.com/x/page/p0342bzxzno.html>, viewed on 7 July 2017.

³⁶ This assertion contributes to the humorous effect of this video because Zhang Quandan at the same time claims himself as a super internet red.

From one perspective, Zhang Quandan indeed reveals certain facts about the internet red circle. The definition of female beauty is very restricted and female internet reds' embodied images are highly homogeneous. The facial features including wide eyes, V-shaped jaw line and sharp nose are called the internet red face. An anecdote is that a technology company tested their face recognition system on 500 internet reds' pictures, so as to show the superiority of their products (Figure 4.20).³⁷ Zhang Quandan's words indeed challenge the ideal of female agency and free choice of the post-feminist discourse. If these female internet reds are brave to create their unique styles as claimed by Zhang Dayi's music video, then why do they have the homogenous internet red face? In line with Gill's (2007) argument in the Western context, although women allege to be autonomous to follow their own desires, the valued physical image is always the similar hairless body, slim waist and firm buttocks. Gill points out that, it is indeed through the explicit and imperative narration of agency and autonomy, which is a requirement of the neoliberal subjectivity to hold accountability to oneself, that post-feminist discourse avoids the critical question of how a socially-constituted ideal of beauty becomes internalized by women. Therefore, I argue that the culture of female internet reds not only reinforces one type of femininity and physical beauty as the hegemonic, but also disavows the power and inequality which contribute to the creation of this situation.

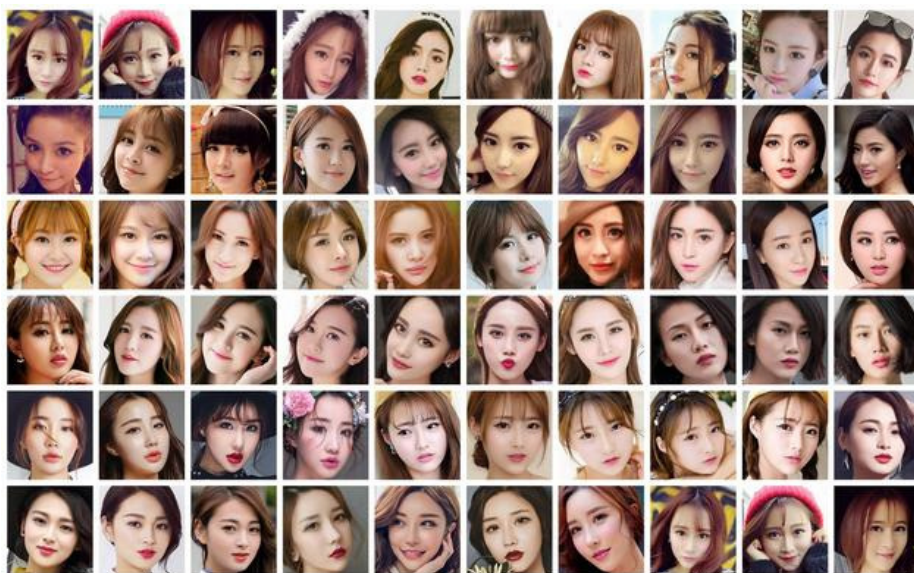


Figure 4.20 The homogenous internet red face

³⁷ Source: <http://tech.sina.com.cn/i/2016-06-29/doc-ifxtmwei9487511.shtml>, data retrieved on 4 July 2017.

But this does not mean Zhang Quandan as a *diaosi* tries to raise critical consciousness among female internet reds and the wider female audience. On the contrary, his interpretation of the internet red culture is contained in a discourse of sexual objectification of women. Besides describing mobile phones as women that are used and owned by men, in the video he transliterated the English word 'internet red' as 'making people tired', implying these girls are sexual objects and arouse (too much) male sexual desire. He also mentioned that once they become famous, they can earn large sums of money even by live-streaming sex in the car. In this sense, Zhang's comments deny the possibility of female liberation and independence not by criticizing the delusion of post-feminist popular culture, but by wielding an even more conservative patriarchal discourse.

The culture of internet reds has become a site to negotiate the social normativities of gender and sexuality in China's online space. In 2015 and 2016, several internet hosts were censored for displaying nudity and pornographic content.³⁸ Although such cases have resulted in strengthened regulations in the video streaming industry, the female hosts are still constantly associated with vulgar content and inappropriate dress in news stories. This is what I have observed when I searched with the key word 'internet red' on the search engine Baidu and the mobile news app NetEase. Interestingly, the user comments on NetEase provide some ironic explanations for the abundance of female internet reds, especially the live streaming hosts. While moving my observation site from Zhang Quandan's video to the NetEase news app, I am reflexive about the cultural environment on this app. This news aggregator in China is branded for its critical user engagement, but it is also often criticized in popular discourses for breeding aggressive online behaviors, due to the users' *diaosi* identity (e.g. Hou 2018). Such a cultural environment reminds me that the user comments may not be neutral or amount to principled discussions and I should consider it as one perspective contributing to the negotiation of gender and sexual normativities in China.

Figure 4.21 shows a screenshot of the comments on a journalistic article revealing details about the life of an internet host.³⁹ Several of the most liked comments express the idea that the female hosts are former prostitutes from Dongguan. The government's previous strict censorship on internet pornography has caused fierce backlash among internet users. Similar dissatisfaction is also found when the underground prostitution industry in Dongguan, a city in the Guangdong province in China, is crushed by the government. These two incidents were both about attempts to remove sex workers and pornographic actresses away from the role of sexual object at policy

³⁸ A China Central Television's current affairs program called *Topics in Focus* (焦点访谈) has dedicated an episode to discuss the pornographic content in live streaming videos. <http://tv.cctv.com/2016/05/07/VIDEKdpE6AGG7agrQ1mGacWW160507.shtml>, viewed on 13 October 2017.

³⁹ Source for the news article: <http://tech.163.com/16/0817/00/BUKLQ39800097U7R.html>, source for the comment section of the article: http://comment.tech.163.com/tech_bbs/BUKLQ39800097U7R.html, data retrieved on 4 July 2017.

level, but leaving the subject position of female sexual object and a patriarchal discourse untouched in society. It is at this juncture that the internet red culture began to acquire public attention. Therefore, internet hosts are imagined as the unemployed prostitutes from Dongguan as demonstrated by the comments in Figure 4.18. Importantly, the news article does not mention any controversial issues related to the internet red phenomenon. Instead, it introduces a host's previous work experiences, her reason for starting a career in the live streaming industry, her income and preferred content in the videos. However, this content seems to be ignored by the commenters. It seems that the only way for them to understand internet reds is to associate the girls on the screen stereotypically with the role of female sexual object.

Here I would like to point out again the leap in the development of feminist sensitivity in China's media discourse. Post-feminist culture in the West stitches together implicitly and tacitly the neoliberal and traditional gender values. It invites women and girls to construct themselves, in a seemingly empowered and autonomous manner, as a subject which resembles heterosexual male fantasy found in pornography (Gill 2007). While internet red culture in China also re-presents the sexual objectification as something desired by women not imposed by men, this discourse remains a celebrative discourse for women. The lack of prominent feminist critiques in China's media culture renders female internet reds under sexist attack. In the performance of *diaosi* identity, a pornographic image is both desired and despised at the same time. Zhang Quandan's comment on female internet reds and the comments to the news article demonstrate that the accomplishment of the glamorous high-achievers is not only trapped by a delusional post-feminist media culture, but also incessantly stigmatized in the discourse of *diaosi*.

话题：梦想交织欲望 一个网络女主播的真实写照 (查看原文)

快速发帖 去跟贴广场看看 >

热门跟贴 (546条评论) 跟贴用户自律公约 | 手机也能看跟贴 >>

阿瑪斯江省金華市手机网友 (ip: 103.154.*.*) 2016-08-17 00:08:49
那些看女主播的人到底是怎么想的

顶[112] 踩[1] 回复 收藏 分享 复制

我姓时间 (阿瑪斯江省手机网友) 2016-08-17 00:14:03
大半夜的发这个，不知道的还以为东莞复工了

顶[97] 踩[0] 回复 收藏 分享 复制

阿瑪斯江省肇庆市手机网友 (ip: 115.60.*.*) 2016-08-17 00:39:47
产业升级了，以前一个钟只能服务一位顾客，现在一个钟可以为多位顾客服务，这是互联网带来的效率的改变呀！

顶[74] 踩[0] 回复 收藏 分享 复制

Li Chuan (阿瑪斯江省温州市苍南县手机网友) 2016-08-17 00:08:17
比较漂亮的产业转型

顶[67] 踩[0] 回复 收藏 分享 复制

百晓霞 (科技鑫妙小编) 2016-08-17 08:04:47
跟帖永远是人民当家作主！

顶[310] 踩[0] 回复 收藏 分享 复制

疯狂的老子 (阿瑪斯江省手机网友) 2016-08-17 00:16:39
东莞被查之后，网红多了许多？这之间有关系么？

Topic: Dreams intertwined with desires: the real life of a female internet host

User 1: Those people who watch female hosts, what are they thinking?

User 2: (The article) is posted at midnight, those who don't know will think the business in Dongguan has been restored.

User 3: The industry has been upgraded. In the past, they can only serve one guest within one hour. Now, they can serve multiple guests within one hour. Such efficiency is brought by the internet.

User 4: Smart industry transformation

User 5: The people are always the masters in comment sections.

User 6: After Dongguan has been regulated, the number of internet reds has increased significantly. Any connections here?

Figure 4.21 NetEase news user comments on internet reds

4.6 Summary

In this chapter, I have explored the sociocultural underpinnings of online fame. One of the functions of fame is to signify, and most laments for the loss of real achievements represented by public figures fail to recognize that the meaningfulness signified by the famous is changing. For modern celebrity, the representation of a glamorous appearance and personality is the meaningful achievement in a society saturated with media images and complicated by the precarious definition of values. Social media have further extended the scope and increased the intensity of this preoccupation. In this case, I have analyzed what appearances and cultural identities are represented by internet reds in China, with a special focus on social media affordances for bringing alternative or even subversive cultural identities into the public domain.

It is not new to argue that celebrity culture is gendered, but what I have found in China's online space is that this gendered pattern is not altered by a new mode of communication. While a large number of female internet reds are preoccupied with self-fashioning themselves into a dominant version of femininity, male internet reds are making fun of themselves in comic video programs. The former ones celebrate themselves as beneficiaries of the exuberant market economy in China; the latter ones ironically express their insecurity and suffering resulting from the fierce market competition. In this sense, the polemic engagement with sociocultural normativities is only discovered in the image of male internet reds, not females. This scenario reminds us of Negra and Tasker's (2014) discussion on the gendered experience of economic recession in Western societies, where 'financial crisis promulgates cultural themes of male infantilism and underdevelopment, circulates tropes of male injury' (2014: 8).

I have also found that the globalized post-feminist media culture contributes to the unequal media representation in female internet reds' image, and more importantly denies possible social and institutional constraints they may encounter in the neoliberal cultural and economic context in contemporary China. Zhang Dayi's *baifumei* identity embraces the status of an aesthetic object with pride and confidence. The discourse of professionalism and entrepreneurship not only helps to transform the objectified position into agentive choice, but also does away with the stigmatized siren image in China's traditional gender value. In this case, internet red's *baifumei* identity helps to forge a delusion of female liberation and independence by the imperative self-narration of free choice, refusing to acknowledge possible inequality and constraints. Moreover, this identity also selectively stresses women's agency in consumption practices, avoiding the discussion of pressure that women may meet in other social fields. Even worse, the lack of prominent feminist critiques in China's media culture further entangles this delusional agentive female identity with a sexist attack from the discourse of *diaosi* identity.

Moreover, I have found the ideological function of celebrity, i.e. to hegemonize certain personalities as the socially acceptable ones, is still at work in the case of male

internet reds in China. The *diaosi* identity indeed brings the under-represented precariat class into the public domain and exposes their underprivileged social circumstances. However, it is the educated white-collars who take a dominant position within the class. The assembly line worker Zhang Quandan and the educated actor script-writer Zhang Quandan are conflated into one identity of *diaosi*. While the former works in a dead-end job in an electronic manufacture contractor's factory, the latter is confronted with the middle-class trap with frustration. Nevertheless, the educated white-collars still find a sense of relief as they can poke fun at the migrant workers or display superiority in terms of culture taste.

In this chapter, by answering what social media celebrities signify, I have also indicated why they can signify. It is because their cultural identities sustain people's assumptions about the prized ways of life. We may indeed criticize the meaninglessness and shallowness of internet reds' selfies and videos; however, such renouncement is more of a result of dominant forms of social recognition being challenged. Apparently, the frustrated and also frustrating *diaosi* image does not fit into the Communist Youth League's intention to promote more 'positive vibes' on the internet as I have mentioned in Chapter 1. Fame in this case is a discursive battleground for the public to interrogate our cultural assumptions, both old and new. In the next chapter, I will move onto the industrial perspective of fame on the internet. The exploration of YouTube beauty vloggers will show that besides sociocultural situatedness, social media celebrity is also constituted by an emerging industrial infrastructure.

The industrial infrastructure of social media celebrity

5.1 Introduction⁴⁰

In the previous chapter, I have shown that although fame on social media is preoccupied with the representation of appearance and personality, it is the specific sociocultural assumption of individuality that enables the famous with signifying power. This chapter addresses the latest metamorphosis of fame from an economic perspective, and suggests that social media celebrities' ascendance to fame also relies on a converging industrial infrastructure.

Modern celebrity is characterized by its commodity nature. Personalities are manufactured in a structure of sub-industries including: entertainment, communication, publicity, representation, appearance, coaching, endorsement, legal and business services industry (Rein et al. 1987). Within this structure, a series of competing interests need to be coordinated among the multiple stakeholders. Traditional entertainment industry's business model, featuring high investment of premium content delivered on limited media space, makes celebrity image formulaic and celebrity status precarious (Gamson 1994). I will show that the industrial structure and cultural logic of social media celebrity are marked by both continuity and break from this traditional model.

This chapter takes YouTube beauty vloggers (also called beauty gurus or beauty YouTubers) as an example to demonstrate the industrial underpinnings of social media celebrity. Although uploading beauty and lifestyle related videos may start as a user's hobby, and the celebrity status is achieved in a DIY manner, against the context of media convergence and institutionalization of YouTube, more and more home-grown stars on YouTube are now turning into professional content creators (Burgess 2012; Kim 2012; Morreale 2014). Beauty vloggers stand in the frontier of this professionalization process as they align precisely with beauty and fashion consumer verticals, thus receiving more opportunities for various forms of monetization (Lobato 2016).

Through an ethnographic approach, I explore the entrepreneurial calculation involved in managing a YouTube beauty channel. More specifically, I examine how beauty vloggers' celebrity status is underpinned by engaging with the platform's technical affordances, revenue model, beauty and fashion consumer market, as well as

⁴⁰ An earlier version of this chapter will appear as M. Hou (2018). Social media celebrity and institutionalization of YouTube, in *Convergence*.

commercial cultural intermediaries. Then combining previous studies' findings on social media celebrities' representational techniques and my empirical exploration of the entrepreneurial calculation, I discuss the cultural logic of this new type of celebrity, explaining to what extent and from what perspectives it is different from traditional celebrity.

5.2 From representation to monetization

5.2.1 The self-representational techniques of social media celebrity

Previous studies on social media celebrity prioritize the investigation of aspirants' performative and representational strategies (Gamson 2011; Turner 2014; García-Rapp 2016; Jerslev 2016; Marwick 2016). These studies demonstrate how the logic of branding and celebrification, which used to be reserved for media professionals and traditional celebrity, now infiltrates ordinary people's everyday life. Micro-celebrities construct an image of the self to be consumed by peer users, thus attracting them as a fan base. Popularity is the goal in this practice, and a set of affiliative techniques are used (Marwick and boyd 2011). However, what has been branded and celebrated seem to be very different. Whereas traditional celebrities' image is characterized by extraordinariness, perfection, glamour and distance, social media celebrities attract attention through the performance of ordinariness, intimacy, and equality (Gamson 2011; Turner 2014).

For instance, Jerslev (2016) finds that the famous British vlogger Zoe Sugg (Zoella) addresses her viewers like a girl next door: informally, and by discussing mundane everyday events. Although uploading makeup tutorials, she adopts a position equal to her fans by rejecting her role as a professional expert. She also films confessional videos, conveying a sense of authenticity by exposing the moments of uneasiness in her life. Also focusing on beauty vloggers, García-Rapp (2016) explores how different types of video content help beauty gurus maintain their celebrity status. She finds that although beauty know-how videos may attract viewers at first, it is vlogs allowing viewers to know the guru's life through affective connections that turn viewers into loyal subscribers. The number of subscribers on YouTube is an important popular marker indicating a guru's ability to attract engaged and repeatedly returning audiences.

The representation of ordinariness, intimacy and equality by social media celebrities creates a sense of authenticity characterizing their videos. However, authenticity is a performed effect and it is always relational and context-dependent (Grazian 2005). It is through a comparison with traditional celebrities' perfection, extraordinariness and traces of heavy industrial production that we can feel authentic about a no-makeup look facing a camera in the setting of a bedroom. In other words, authenticity on YouTube does not refer to a reflection of reality without mediation; instead, it is a specific means and content of representation. As Marwick (2013b) discovers, for fashion bloggers, authenticity specifically means three things: 'a palpable sense of truthful

self-expression', 'a connection with and responsiveness to the audience' and 'an honest engagement with commodity goods and brands' (2013b: 2).

We should also note that personalities in reality TV have long been employing self-branding and self-representational practices. Andrejevic (2004) shows that openness and self-disclosure are preferred qualities for candidates in reality TV programs, and the strategies to establish intimacy, ordinariness and equality are not native to the internet either. Corner (2002a: 260) suggests that reality TV's sense of authenticity is achieved by the 'documentary imperative', featuring content such as high-intensity incidents, anecdotal knowledge (first-person gossipy accounts) and snoopy sociability (amused-by-stander witnessing routines in other people's working life). It's not difficult to discern the traces of this imperative in popular vlog videos such as 'one day in my life', 'my morning routine' and other confessional videos.

Having in mind the representational techniques underscoring social media celebrity, this study tries to complement our understanding regarding the newest development in social media celebrity culture from the perspective of industrial factors. In order to do so, we firstly need to understand that attention and influence on social media are not only a matter of personal aspiration to fame, but also demanded by marketers and publicists as a tool for communicating commercial messages.

5.2.2 Social media celebrities as social media influencers

The contemporary internet is multifaceted and multipurpose, as it is embedded in a wide array of social activities as infrastructure (Hine 2015). Home-grown stars are regarded by marketing and publicity practitioners as social media influencers, whose media visibility and original content can be leveraged to promote brand messages. Hearn and Schoenhoff (2016) state that the authentic and trustworthy personal brand of social media celebrities can be capitalized on by companies and advertisers for consumer outreach. From one perspective, they extend traditional celebrities' function of personalizing the process of consumption (Dyer 1998). From another perspective, marketers now search for brand storytellers instead of someone who only lends his or her name to the brand. The trustworthy and intimate relationship between the influencers and communities, built through narratives, helps contextualize brand images and messages (Khamis et al. 2016).

Not only do brands seek out for celebrity influence among audiences; marketing practices in today's converging media environment also actively contribute to the production of celebrity image (Hackley and Hackley 2015). The media exposure and representation brought about by endorsement contributes to celebrity status and celebrity image. The reciprocal relationship between the marketing system and celebrity is also implicated in the quantitative models developed by marketers to identify social media influencers. Among other popular metrics such as the number of followers and reposts, the number of industry events or brand cooperation that a social media celebrity has participated in is also an important index in evaluating his or her popularity (Booth and Matic 2011).

5.2.3 The institutionalization of YouTube

The industrial underpinning of social media celebrity is closely associated with the platform's technical affordances and business model. Kim (2012) argues that YouTube used to be a 'virtual village', where amateurs share their user-generated content in online communities. Now, it has been institutionalized into a platform inhabited by professionally generated content. He points out that as legacy media are strategically digitalized, new media like YouTube also imitate the role of television, by legally managing the distribution of broadcasting content and smoothing links between contents and commercials. The series of copyright lawsuits by YouTube have forced the platform to implement strict copyright policies, making user-generated original content a crucial revenue target.

YouTube's industrialization process is also evident in how the company discursively constructs its business as a facilitating but neutral 'platform', thus positioning itself strategically among users, advertisers, professional content creators and legislative regulators (Gillespie 2010). In Gillespie's observation, the word 'platform' in the contemporary IT industry 'suggests a progressive and egalitarian arrangement, promising to support those who stand upon it' (Gillespie 2010: 350). In this sense, for ordinary users, YouTube empowers them to speak and interact freely; for advertisers and professional content owners, YouTube helps them to connect with their target audience efficiently. YouTube also actively manages its legislative environment, again by discursively constructing the business as a platform. In some policy issues, YouTube emphasizes its role as the facilitator of unfettered circulation of information. In other cases, it downplays this active role, presenting itself as a mere intermediary, and thus leaving the liability of controversial content to content providers and users.

Besides YouTube's strategic self-positioning against various constituencies, the institutionalization process can also be observed from how YouTube positions its users. In 2010, the famous 'Broadcast Yourself' logo was removed from YouTube's homepage. Instead of conceptualizing users as broadcasters, they are now positioned as content creators. In the 'creator hub' function, directions are listed to support users to 'create and share great videos', 'connect with fans', 'build a business and get help to grow'. The guidance presupposes that users upload videos with the intention to achieve large numbers of views and economic rewards. Both Burgess (2012) and Van Dijck (2013) emphasize the role of interface design in directing usage. As the creator hub invites professional video providers, the user-friendly, TV-like video display page invites more audience-centric users.

Cunningham et al. (2016) theorize the institutionalization of YouTube against a larger context of industrial convergence and the emergence of a new screen ecology. The industrial culture of mass media featuring premium content is interpenetrating with IT companies' cultural logic of 'scale, automation, permanent beta, repaid prototyping and iteration' (Cunningham et al. 2016: 379). The result is a clash of business cultures between the IT industry and Hollywood's incumbents. They point out that as both business models aim at monetizing screen content, companies like Google/

YouTube and Facebook have already developed large user bases and have access to extensive behavioral data, enabling them to configure the audience precisely and deliver advertisements more efficiently. In a similar vein, Van Dijck (2013) argues that the unique selling point of YouTube, compared to the broadcast industry, is its ability to bring specified audience groups to content and advertisers. While the search engine function is the connecting force in this process, what YouTube lacks is attractive professionally produced content. Of course, YouTube also cooperates with major broadcast producers to fill their channels. Nevertheless, this premium content model meets fierce competition with other transaction and subscription based platforms such as Netflix and Amazon in the online video distribution ecology (Cunningham and Silver 2013). Thus, home-grown creators, who can provide advertiser-friendly contents and engaged subscribers, become a strategic niche for YouTube in this new screen ecology.

Home-grown YouTube stars are professionalized with the help of commercial cultural intermediary companies like multichannel networks (henceforth MCN). Most MCNs 'provide non-professional creator with technical, promotional and advertising services, in exchange for a share of customer's ad revenue' (Lobato 2016: 351). On the one hand, these services are the extension of media work done by media buyers, ad agencies, agents, managers in the traditional entertainment industry. On the other hand, MCN's business model aims at scale and volume by devoting more resources to top level talents (the big personalities) and automated, impersonal services to a large pool of potential talents. The flourishing of MCN companies helps YouTube professionalize home-grown content creators as they can increase the quality of videos and avoid copyright infringement. More importantly, as an increasing number of users sign up for the YouTube Partner Program, the ad revenue they can get is significantly lowered. MCNs therefore become an important middle-man to re-introduce market scarcity and bridge professional content creators with their economic sources on the advertising market (Cunningham et al. 2016).

5.3 Data collection

In this study, I apply digital ethnography as an approach to explore the entrepreneurial calculations that YouTube beauty vloggers conduct when managing their accounts and media representation. Rather than rendering beauty videos as multi-modal texts, an ethnographic approach enables me to view vlogging as a contextualized cultural and economic practice on YouTube (Hine 2000; Varis 2016). It helps me explore how beauty-related content is produced with a prospect of channel growth and audience engagement.

As a YouTube user myself, I also watch beauty and lifestyle related videos. In this sense, I regard myself as an insider in the YouTube beauty community with certain emic knowledge about the field – useful as a basis for this systematic ethnographic study. In terms of research participants, I did not rush to select the most subscribed to personalities, or the ones that have attracted the most attention from mass media.

Instead, I relied mostly on YouTube's algorithm by searching with a series of key words such as 'beauty gurus', 'beauty vloggers'. These are the terms often used to refer to beauty vloggers in news media. The search results were then based on the popularity algorithm including but not limited to the number of subscribers, views, and ratings. In this way, I approached the field as an ordinary user interested in beauty-related information. After I clicked into each channel, other related channels were recommended by YouTube. This sampling method is similar to snowball sampling; however, in this case I made use of the 'connective affordances' of YouTube (Van Dijck 2013). The sample size in the current study is 10 beauty vloggers and 17 YouTube channels, as seven of the vloggers have a second life vlog channel besides the main beauty channel (see Table 5.1).

Table 5.1 Selected vloggers

Main channel	Subscriber count ⁴¹	Claimed by MCN	Second channel
Benthany Mota	10,342,410	none	BenthaysLife
Estée Lalonde	1,174,519	MakerStudio	Everyday Estée
FleurDeForce	1,415,347	StyleHaul	Fleur DeVlog
Ingrid Nilsen	3,993,180	BigFrame	TheGridMonster
itsjudytime	1,374,527	digitsshow	itsJudysLife
Lily Pebbles	376,571	StyleHaul	
Nikkiphillippi	1,390,170	StyleHaul	ThePhillippis
Tanya Burr	3,656,007	StyleHaul	
Tati	2,493,957	none	
Zoella	11,538,219	StyleHaul	More Zoella

The data collection process is divided into three steps and the major instrument is observation (see Figure 5.1). Firstly, in order to make myself familiar with the vloggers' content, I watched their most recent five videos and top ten all-time most viewed videos. The observation also included the information boxes for the videos, an important location for search engine optimization practices. I also browsed the general layout and design of the channels to see how content is organized by the vloggers. Secondly, having gathered knowledge of the general content and format of beauty vlogs, I turned to third-party analytical tools to gain an overview on the development of the vloggers' main channels. The websites *Socialblade.com*, *VidStatsX.com* and *ChannelMetrics.com* provide diachronic data analytics based on various popular metrics.⁴² It was at this step that I chose Tati Westbrook's channel (User URL: [glamlifeguru](https://www.youtube.com/user/glamlifeguru); screen name: Tati)

⁴¹ Data retrieved on 28 January 2017.

⁴² See: <https://socialblade.com/>; <http://vidstatsx.com/>; <https://channelmeter.com/>

as a major focus for the third step of observation, because her channel has experienced a significant growth since September 2015.⁴³ Thirdly, I watched more videos by Tati from her playlists. I then explored how she reflected on her YouTube career in an interview with Tubefilter, and how she was discussed by audiences in the discussion sections on Reddit and GuruGossip.⁴⁴ The discussion threads on these two websites provide more general reflections on Tati's channel and her overall style as a vlogger.

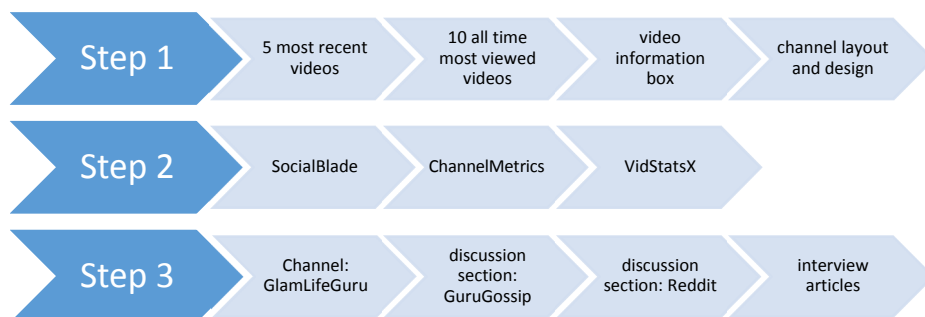


Figure 5.1 Data collecting procedure

5.4 Entrepreneurial calculation

5.4.1 Beauty vlogging at the conjuncture of industries

As discussed above, traditional celebrity is economically embedded in an industrial structure of multiple stakeholders. Comparably on YouTube, a beauty vlogger is also positioned at the conjuncture of several industries: a social media platform, commercial cultural intermediaries and the advertising market. For entrepreneurial vloggers, making YouTube videos may start as a hobby but then become their occupation. In Tati Westbrook's interview with Tubefilter, she claimed that she started the channel with a clear goal to make beauty vlogging her career.⁴⁵ Indeed, successful content creators can make millions of dollars per year. In June 2015, Forbes published a list of 'The World's Highest Paid YouTube Stars'.⁴⁶ Michelle Phan, the role model for many beauty vloggers, had earned three million dollars from her channel and her makeup product line over the past year.

⁴³ Tati's YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/user/GlamLifeGuru>

⁴⁴ See: <http://gurugossiper.com/viewforum.php?cache=1&f=385>, https://www.reddit.com/r/BeautyGuruChat/comments/4bdj9j/weekly_guru_discussion_tatiglamlifeguru/

⁴⁵ Source: <http://www.tubefilter.com/2016/02/03/glam-life-guru-tati-westbrook-youtube-millionaires/>, viewed on 27 January 2017.

⁴⁶ Source: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/maddieberg/2015/10/14/the-worlds-highest-paid-youtube-stars-2015/#69c2a2f8542c>, viewed on 27 January 2017.

Beauty vloggers monetize their videos in several ways. The first is through the YouTube Partner Program. Content creators can join the program by displaying automatically distributed advertisements in their channels and videos, and share 55% of the ad revenue with YouTube. A key factor in this means of monetization is CPM, cost per mille, or cost per thousand views. For every one thousand ad views, advertisers pay a certain amount of money to YouTube and content creators. We should note that CPM is an advertiser-oriented, instead of creator-oriented figure. It is the advertisement market on YouTube that decides CPM instead of content creators. When the need for YouTube ads is high, for instance in holiday seasons, the ad prices are high. Some ads are placed by bidding for keywords, so if a keyword is popular among advertisers, the CPM for that ad is also high. In this situation, content creators need to optimize their content and metadata of their videos so as to make sure high CPM ads appear in their channels.

Many beauty vloggers now sign up for an MCN. In general, MCNs can provide content creators with technological, financial, legal, talent developing and marketing solutions. In return, MCNs extract certain amounts of revenue from content creators. Previous studies have shown that MCN stands in the middle ground of industrial convergence between traditional entertainment industries and IT companies and is one of the major forces in professionalizing amateur content creators (Lobato 2016; Cunningham et al. 2016). In Table 5.1 we can see that eight from the ten vloggers I have selected are claimed by top MCNs. It is not surprising that five of them have joined StyleHaul, since it specializes in the beauty and lifestyle vertical.

MCNs can help beauty vloggers to develop branded content, indicating that beauty and fashion industries nowadays also need a 'hype' or 'vibe' in the digital world through images of social media celebrities. Beauty vloggers in this case are 'social media influencers' or 'key opinion leaders' in marketing lingo, whose authenticity and trustworthiness can be leveraged for commercial messages. This is where we see the tension between communal and commercial cultures. In beauty and fashion-related videos, vloggers are expected to give honest reviews and recommendations. A common situation I have discovered is that vloggers express explicitly in their videos that they are in collaboration with a brand, or a certain company sends the product to them. Here, my findings regarding vloggers' attitudes towards being authentic is consistent with those of Marwick's (2013b), who believes that one should engage with advertising honestly and set personal experiences of the products as a prerequisite to endorsement.

Sometimes, vloggers try to make brand sponsorship a win-win situation for everyone by providing discount links for the sponsored products in videos, so that vloggers get paid, companies get sales and subscribers get discounts. There are also national policies regarding advertising in online content. For instance, the Advertisement Standards Authority issued new guidelines for YouTube product placement and advertising in the UK. Now YouTubers need to put the word 'Ad' in the title of their videos. This new policy received certain criticisms from content creators. The famous British

beauty vlogger Fleur stated in an interview with BBC that putting the word 'Ad' in a video title sends out a far stronger message than required, distracting viewers from the content when a 10-minute video only contains 30 seconds of paid content.⁴⁷

5.4.2 Beauty vlogger channel format

Beauty vloggers' channels publish beauty, fashion and lifestyle related content. Nowadays, it is common for a beauty vlogger to have two or more channels: one 'main channel' posts beauty-related videos, while the second channel focuses on their daily activities and other miscellaneous content. García-Rapp (2016) also discovered that beauty gurus' videos can be categorized into two types: commercial-oriented and community-oriented. The former is represented by beauty know-how videos and the latter by vlogs. While vlogs in the early days of YouTube often featured a user sitting in their bedroom talking directly to the camera, now vlogging is more and more associated with the 'slice of life' idea, where YouTubers take the camera with them (almost) everywhere they go and document their daily lives. For instance, London-based beauty vlogger Estée Lalonde's second channel is called 'Everyday Estée'.⁴⁸

These vlogs indeed demonstrate social media celebrities' representational techniques of interactively disseminating information about one's everyday and private life (Gamson 2011), but we should also note one economic consideration behind them. Contemporary marketing strategies prioritize storytelling which contextualizes brand information in the celebrity endorser's life, casting the brand in a cultural ambience (Hearn and Schoenhoff 2016; Khamis et al. 2016). I found that beauty vloggers also embed branded messages in 'slice of life' vlogs by, for instance, inviting viewers to peep into a mundane morning grooming routine where sponsored products are featured. In this case, what is promoted is not only a *good* product, but a *contextualized* product suitable for a busy Monday morning. We can see that while marketing strategies try to blur the generic boundary between advertisement and content, fusing them into 'story', on YouTube, it is also difficult to draw a clear line between community-oriented and commercial-centered videos.

In vloggers' main channels, there are three major types of content: *tutorial*, *consumer review* and *consumption exhibition*. One may know a beauty vlogger firstly from his or her makeup tutorials, where the vlogger does makeup in front of the camera. The makeup looks are anchored in certain social settings (e.g. holiday makeup, everyday makeup, beach makeup) or imitate role models (e.g. the Kardashian look). Although these videos are titled as 'tutorials' and audiences may indeed acquire skills they are eager to learn, many vloggers like to suggest that 'this is how I do it', or 'you look beautiful in your own ways'. It seems that they do not fully embrace the expert role, but instead adopt a more modest position of sharing knowledge and experiences

⁴⁷ Source: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/article/30211149/youtubers-hit-back-at-advert-guidance>, viewed on 28 January 2017.

⁴⁸ Estée's vlog channel: <https://www.youtube.com/user/essiebuttonvlogs>

with community members. Here we can identify a sense of equality in the videos as discussed by previous studies (García-Rapp 2016; Jerslev 2016; Smith 2016).

Apart from makeup tutorials, there are also other types of beauty, fashion and life-style related tips that vloggers may include in their main channel. Consumer review video is another important type of content, yet it is an umbrella term for several topics. For instance, 'monthly favorite' is a series that most vloggers film at the end of each month or the beginning of next month, where they give a summary on beauty, fashion and other personal products that they have enjoyed using. Another category is 'consumption exhibition'. It shows what vloggers have bought, what they have in their bags, house tours, or even what they eat during a day. Compared to product reviews, exhibition videos only demonstrate what has been purchased or used, instead of giving detailed user feedback on the products. Vloggers tend to be cautious about this distinction, since their credibility depends on giving honest and precise information about products. Haul video is also a place where vloggers request for their subscribers' opinions about whether they would like to see a more detailed review or try-on videos.

5.4.3 Normativity vs. personal creativity

In all the three types of beauty videos mentioned above, there are certain fixed titles, topics and tags, for instance 'monthly favorites' 'products used-up', 'beauty/ fashion haul', '20 dollar/pound/ makeup challenge'. These content formats and titles function as norms for content production in the YouTube beauty community. Many vloggers try to catch up with a trendy or viral topic to the extent that a media hype is created. It is not new for media content production to be self-referential in the digital era; the time-honored news industry is famous for that. However, a new concern for social media celebrities on YouTube is the searchability of content. By following the trendy topics, vloggers can increase the searchability of their videos, as they are creating something that people can find and already know beforehand. This explains why makeup tutorial videos receive more views compared to vlog videos, as discovered by García-Rapp (2016), since know-how content tends to be searched by non-subscriber viewers. Here, we can see that to gain more media visibility, beauty vloggers produce content taking into consideration the technical affordances of the platform. Other search engine optimization strategies include, for instance, feeding detailed product and video information to the information box, i.e. the meta-data of the video. In the YouTube creator hub, the guidelines also suggest content creators make their URL name consistent with how viewers and subscribers address them, so that precise search results can be yielded when users search with a vlogger's name.

A recently emerged topic in product review videos is called 'first impression'. Although we don't know who first came up with this name, Judy from channel 'itsjudys-life' is an early adopter of this topic. Judy is a professional vlogger, mother of three girls. She owns three YouTube channels: a beauty channel, a vlog channel and a mom

channel after she gave birth to her first child Juliana.⁴⁹ The whole family's everyday life is on YouTube and her three children are 'YouTube kids', whose life has been documented in vlogs from the moment they were born. In the 'first impression' video, Judy usually begins to wear a product in test from early morning and then gives the first impression review. What makes the videos different (from the literal meaning of 'first impression') is that she continuously takes photos and films video clips every few hours to report whether the beauty product functions well. The detailed reviews, as embedded in Judy's busy and sometimes frustrating domestic life, aim to give the audience practical reviews. The product should not only look good in front of camera and on the red carpet for two hours (like what we see in mass media celebrity endorsed advertisements), but also endure the demanding tasks of being a professional, a wife and a mom throughout the day.

However, if a beauty vlogger only follows the normativities of content creation, one cannot be distinguished from other competitors in the YouTube beauty community. While previous studies discovered that a social media celebrity's sense of uniqueness can be expressed by staging one's private life, I found that in terms of video content, one also needs to be innovative. Tati Westbrook's channel 'glamlifeguru' is a good example to demonstrate the balance between innovation and normativity of YouTube content creation. Based on statistics from VidStatsX (Figure 5.2 and Figure 5.3),⁵⁰ we can see that her channel began to grow slowly and steadily from January 2013. Since September 2015, the channel experienced a surge in its total number of subscribers, monthly video views, daily gained subscribers, daily gained views and total subscribers gained.

In Tati's video list, I found that she began to upload videos in a series form from June 2013. Every Monday, she goes to drugstores to discover cosmetics that are on sale, often using coupons clipped from the Sunday paper. The video is titled 'Madness Monday', referring to the fact that beauty products can be purchased at very low prices as long as customers are on the lookout for discount opportunities and coupons. On Tuesdays, she introduces a beauty tip, which she calls 'Tip Tuesday'. On Thursdays, she gives feedback on what she has bought on Monday in videos titled 'Hot or Not Thursday'. Some of the extra products she buys on Mondays are given as gifts to subscribers on Fridays, hence 'Give Away Friday'. In her interview with Tubefilter, she also highlights her high uploading frequency as a feature making her unique among YouTube beauty vloggers.⁵¹ Moreover, the video titles not only include the series

⁴⁹ Judy's three YouTube channels: <https://www.youtube.com/user/itsjudyttime>, <https://www.youtube.com/user/itsJudysLife>, <https://www.youtube.com/user/itsMommysLife>

⁵⁰ Source for Figure 5.2: <http://socialblade.com/youtube/user/glamlifeguru>, data retrieved on 23 February 2016. Source for Figure 5.3: <http://socialblade.com/youtube/user/glamlifeguru/monthly>, data retrieved on 23 February 2016.

⁵¹ Source: <http://www.tubefilter.com/2016/02/03/glam-life-guru-tati-westbrook-youtube-millionaires/>, data retrieved on 24 February 2016.

name, but also the specific product, drugstore name or more general topics like review or haul, which helps to optimize searchability.

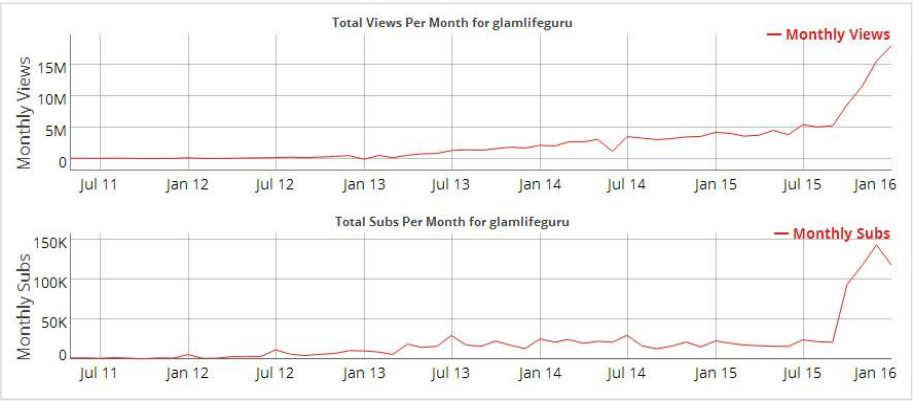


Figure 5.2 Total views and total subscribers per month for glamlifeguru

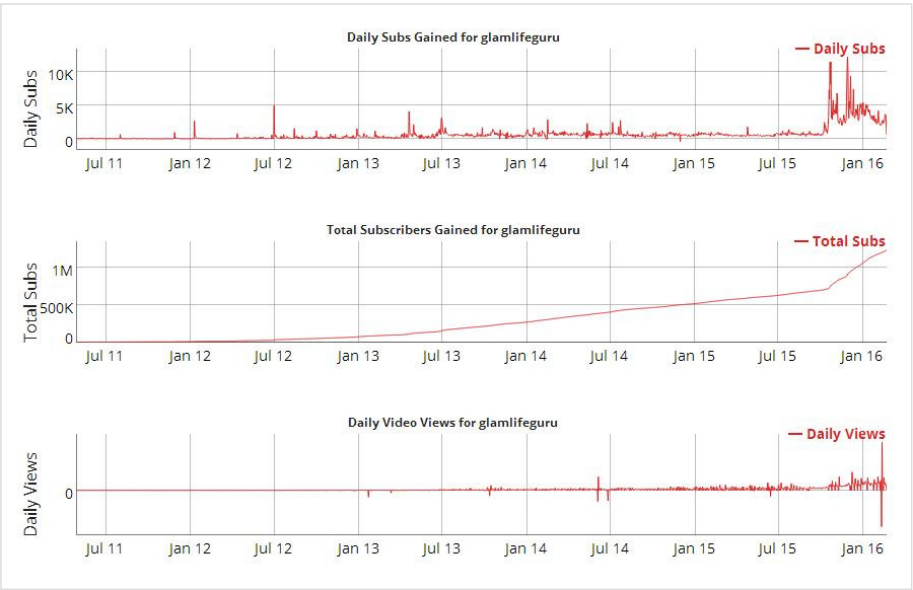


Figure 5.3 Daily subscribers gained, total subscribers gained and daily video views for glamlifeguru

Another unique point of Tati's channel is mentioned in both her interview with Tube-filter and one of her videos.⁵² She acknowledges that in the beauty vlogging community she is relatively older, especially when the earlier days of YouTube was dominated by teens. She constantly 'got strange hate' for 'being old and still doing YouTube'. She believes nowadays the platform has become more mature and her professional reviews help her to engage with more mature audiences. In the guru discussion section on Reddit, users also raise the topic of her age. In Figures 5.4 and 5.5, both users express the positive aspects of being an older guru on YouTube. The first user thinks Tati's opinion is different from other younger but homogeneous gurus. The second user likes Tati's voice since many younger vloggers yell through the whole video.⁵³ From my fieldwork I also find that Tati's videos are more serious in terms of style compared to younger vloggers, for instance Bethany Mota in my sample, who features a cheerful and playful style.⁵⁴



Figure 5.4 Tati is different from other 'cookie cutter clone' younger gurus



Figure 5.5 Tati's voice is soothing

While Tati's commitment to consistent updates and her unique position of giving more mature opinions may explain the steady growth of her channel, I now try to explore what contributes to the sudden growth of her channel. Many factors may lead to such growth, including keywords and metadata search engine optimization, featuring and recommendation by fellow YouTubers and of course new attractive content. An explicit change in Tati's channel is that she has introduced a new series 'WTF super luxury product first impression', in which she purchases and reviews luxurious cosmetics at the top end of the price range. Again, the first impression video was an earlier established trending topic, but Tati locates her niche market specifically in extreme luxurious products. In the interview with Tubefilter, she expresses that audiences are curious about ridiculously over-priced products. According to the statistics from

⁵² Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UgqvK9fvXgU>, viewed on 24 February 2016.

⁵³ Source: https://www.reddit.com/r/BeautyGuruChat/comments/4bdj9j/weekly_guru_discussion_tatiglamlifeguru/, data retrieved on 1 March 2016.

⁵⁴ Bethany Mota's YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/user/Macbarbie07>

ChannelMeter, in the most viewed videos within 30 days, the top three positions are all taken up by WTF series videos (Figure 5.6).⁵⁵

However, from Tati's all-time most viewed video ranking we can see that her content is organized clearly along the price range in the makeup market (Figure 5.7).⁵⁶ First of all, four WTF videos appear in the top six most viewed videos. A 2012 video '\$20 makeup challenge' is on the fifth place. I think this is not only because the video has accumulated views for a long period, but also because it features one of the most established themes that audiences may search videos with. Similarly, other top-ranking videos all give reviews on more affordable drugstore products, such as 'Drugstore favorites and hate it's', 'Luxury products regret buying'. In a video titled 'Best Drug Store under 10 Dollar', Tati explains that she wishes to continue the 'high and low' theme in her channel.⁵⁷ This designing of theme suggests that beauty vloggers need to envision market segmentation, as consumers with different purchasing power may expect to watch different video content. In doing so, vloggers can attract more views and subscribers.

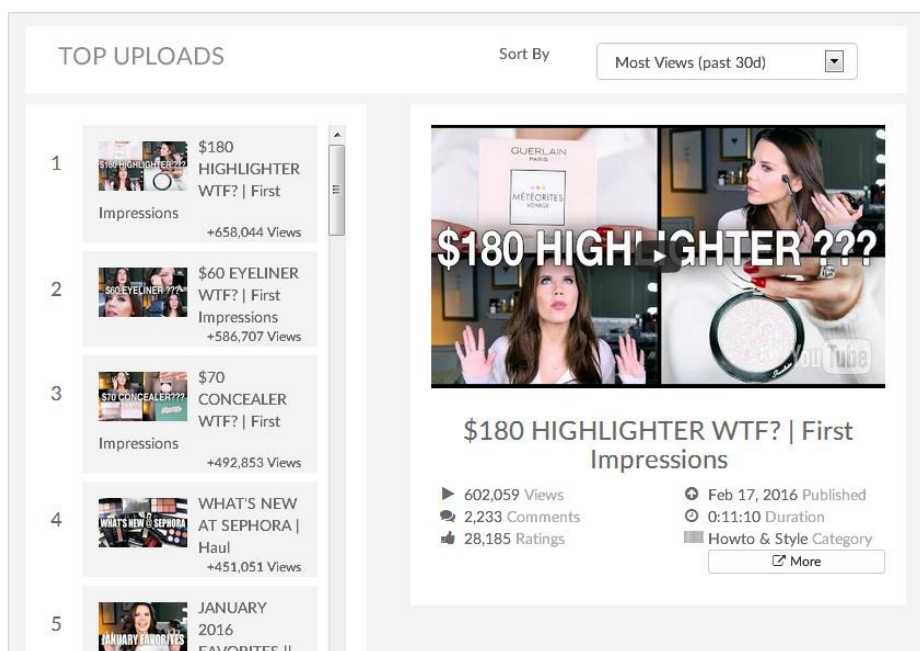


Figure 5.6 Most viewed videos within 30 days for glamlifeguru

⁵⁵ Source: <https://channelmeter.com/channels/tati>, data retrieved on 26 February 2016.

⁵⁶ Source: <http://socialblade.com/youtube/user/glamlifeguru/videos/mostviewed>, data retrieved on 26 February 2016.

⁵⁷ Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QcT6XZIfMpM>, date retrieved on 26 February 2016.

2015-10-14	\$90 LIPSTICK WTF? First Impressions	1.7M	43K	98.4%	5K	\$869 - \$7.0K
2015-11-25	\$200 FOUNDATION WTF? First Impressions	1.3M	24K	98.1%	2K	\$669 - \$5.4K
2015-10-06	DRUGSTORE MAKEUP Favorites & Hate it's Maybelline	1.0M	24K	96.7%	2K	\$519 - \$4.1K
2015-10-07	FOREVER 21 MAKEUP DISASTER First Impressions	895.8K	30K	98.3%	4K	\$448 - \$3.6K
2012-07-20	\$20 MAKEUP CHALLENGE Bombshell Look	844.9K	19K	98.1%	1K	\$422 - \$3.4K
2015-10-28	\$70 MASCARA WTF? First Impressions	825.8K	23K	93.5%	2K	\$413 - \$3.3K
2015-10-21	REVLON ULTRA HD MATTE LIPCOLOR First Impressions	762.6K	31K	98.7%	6K	\$381 - \$3.1K
2015-06-22	LUXURY PRODUCTS I Regret Buying	749.2K	28K	98.6%	879	\$375 - \$3.0K
2016-01-06	\$200 FOUNDATION WTF? First Impressions	726.7K	34K	98.8%	3K	\$363 - \$2.9K
2016-01-01	WORST PRODUCTS of 2015 GlamLifeGuru	715.7K	28K	98.6%	3K	\$358 - \$2.9K
2015-12-02	\$100 POWDER WTF? First Impressions	691.6K	3K	97.6%	225	\$346 - \$2.8K
2015-12-23	\$55 LIP BALM WTF? First Impressions	666.2K	24K	98.2%	4K	\$333 - \$2.7K
2013-08-24	Hey Guys ... I'm Tati	641.4K	14K	98.3%	961	\$321 - \$2.6K
2015-07-06	Q&A My Age - Plastic Surgery - Lip Injections - Mar...	636.5K	19K	98.1%	2K	\$318 - \$2.5K
2014-05-05	FIRST IMPRESSIONS COVERGIRL + An Epic Fail	623.1K	21K	98.7%	1K	\$312 - \$2.5K
2015-12-16	\$125 MAKEUP PALETTE WTF? First Impressions	625.1K	22K	98.6%	4K	\$313 - \$2.5K

Figure 5.7 All-time most viewed videos for glamlifeguru

The high and low topic is indeed regarded by viewers as a prominent feature in user discussions on Reddit, although they tend to receive this topic with critical reflection. The threads in Figure 5.8 and Figure 5.9 show that audiences raise doubts on Tati's unbiasedness and her attitudes regarding products at both ends of the price range.⁵⁸ Especially when she can afford and enjoy more expensive products, her opinions on the affordable ones are constantly questioned.

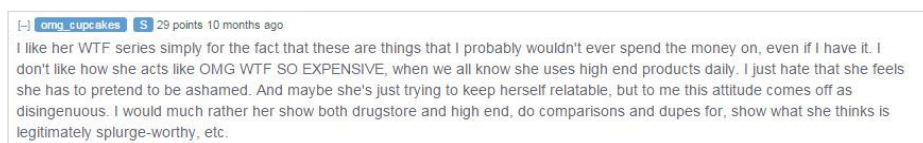


Figure 5.8 Tati's ashamed attitude towards expensive makeup is disingenuous

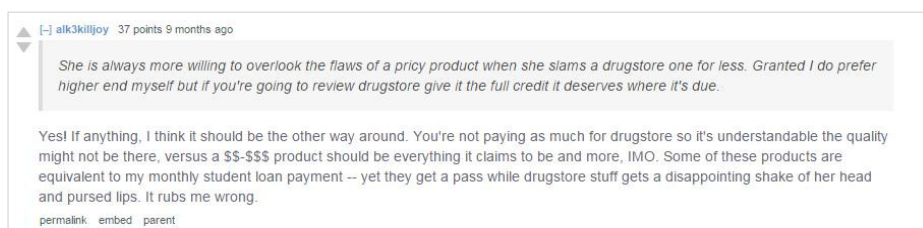


Figure 5.9 Tati slams drugstore products

⁵⁸ Source: https://www.reddit.com/r/BeautyGuruChat/comments/4bdj9j/weekly_guru_discussion_tatiglamlifeguru/, data retrieved on 1 March 2016.

Around the time of her channel breakthrough, Tati also embarked on brand collaboration. In October 2015, Tati launched a makeup line which she curated within the brand Birchbox, and also a subscription box including Tati-approved beauty/skin-care product samples. In this case, Tati's celebrity image was materialized into products that can be purchased online, thus helping to make her name known to customers beyond her YouTube circle. Besides increasing Tati's media visibility, this collaboration is also an example of how contemporary marketing practices take place at the interplay between celebrity endorsers' image and brand image. The products curated and selected by Tati are not simply labeled with her name. The product concepts and features, such as 'a smudge-proof bright lipstick', demonstrate Tati's unique makeup style and life-style.⁵⁹ The samples in the subscription box also crystalize her makeup and grooming know-how.

5.4.4 Upload timing, frequency and budget control

I have mentioned that many YouTubers now have two or more channels. Apart from the beauty-related content, they also film 'slices of life' vlogs, showing the everydayness in their lives. This is indeed one way to produce more content and generate more revenue. I also find that beauty vloggers embrace seasonal series such as 'Vlogtober' (vlog+October) or 'Vlogmas' (vlog+Christmas). During these two months, they increase the frequency of uploading and also touch upon seasonal and holiday topics. Beauty and fashion content is very sensitive to seasonal change, and the advertising need for season-sensitive products is also high at the turn of seasons. Therefore, vloggers usually follow the trend of seasonal topics by uploading videos such as 'Fall makeup haul' or 'Beach/pool makeup tutorials', not only to cater for viewers' needs to receive more views but also to attract high CPM ads for their videos. Vloggers become even more productive in December and the vlogs often start with Christmas tree shopping and decorating and then continue to New Year's Eve. The other side of the YouTubers' financial story is the budget control in making videos. Scripted content such as sketch comedy may require professional cameras, sound and lighting systems and film studios. It also costs more time to film and edit. In contrast, everyday life vlog videos are easier to make and more budget-friendly.

5.5 The cultural logic of social media celebrity

5.5.1 From guesswork authenticity to staged authenticity

Drawing on previous studies on social media celebrities' self-representational strategies and my analysis on the industrial factors, I now reflect on the cultural logic of

⁵⁹ In this video, Tati explains designing the Birchbox and the makeup line. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6MHltoRsX98>, data retrieved on 1 March 2016.

social media celebrity. Firstly, social media celebrity has a new approach to authenticity which I call 'staged authenticity'. Celebrity practitioners establish a sense of authenticity through the interactive representation of the intimate and private self, and they adopt affiliative techniques to show equality and commonality with fans. However, we should not forget that in traditional celebrity culture authenticity is also an important element. Fans and audiences seek the authenticity of a celebrity by collecting endless gossip articles which tell them what the glamorous stars really look like in their private lives, when the stage curtain falls (Gamson 1994). Nevertheless, a basic celebrification strategy, which was already adopted in the era of Julius Caesar, is to make one's private life as raw material feeding the public image (Braudy 1986). The paparazzi industry demonstrates this point, as studio-controlled, if not studio-fed private-ness is disclosed to audiences. As such, authenticity for traditional celebrity is a non-stop recursion, a guesswork between reality and fiction, and between private and public.

On social media, however, the recursive play between celebrity as a character on stage and celebrity as a professional in life stops. As an assumedly non-scripted genre, the 'slice of life' vlog creates a situation where celebrity practitioners play the role of themselves in their own lives for the sake of staging their lives. Here, the Goffmanian distinction between the 'front region' and the 'back region' has collapsed (Goffman 1959). Beauty videos such as 'my shower routine' and 'get ready with me' stage the back region of a vlogger's life in front of the camera. Following McCannell (1973), these videos exemplify staged authenticity: the fostered impressions of certain back regions have been entered, supporting people's belief of authentic experience. With traditional celebrities, we need to play the guesswork regarding authenticity underneath the public image, behind the front stage, while with vlogs the subtext is 'authenticity is here and now, actually there is nothing else more than authenticity'. Of course, all these efforts made by vloggers to bring audiences closer to their private lives do not mean we can really walk into their lives. Beauty vlogger Zoe Sugg complained in her tweets that some viewers tracked down her house and rang her doorbell. She even installed CCTV to stop them.⁶⁰ In this regard, I argue that one of the elements in the cultural logics of social media celebrity is a generic innovation called staged authenticity.

5.5.2 From managed distance to managed connectedness

Related to the concept of authenticity is connectedness. Traditional celebrities keep a distance from their audience. According to Gamson (1994), such distance is kept intentionally so that only the controlled and managed celebrity images are released with

⁶⁰ Source: <http://www.glamourmagazine.co.uk/article/zoella-asks-nicely-for-viewers-to-stop-turning-up-at-her-home>, and <http://www.wetheunicorns.com/news/zalfie-alfie-deyes-zoella-zoe-sugg-security-house-cctv-fans-outside/#14RKzTsQAv9eWHbW.97>, viewed on 30 January 2017.

the purpose to protect their commodity value. Therefore, celebrities used to be watched from afar, or imagined by scraping pieces of information available in gossip magazines and interviews together. Celebrity teams also didn't care about audience reception very much, as the major publicity work for traditional celebrity used to be one-way communication and to 'get the word out' and 'hit as many places as possible' (Gamson 1994: 114). This is because a celebrity's direct market is entertainment companies and media outlets, not audiences.

This is not the case for YouTube beauty vloggers. My observation revealed that they consider the direct feedback and requirements from viewers and subscribers seriously. Not only do they ask for suggestions for video content, express the motivation to make friends on YouTube, but also learn about audience reception by navigating through the popular metrics and data analytics of the platform. In a recent video from the British vlogger Lily Pebble, she shows how she plans video ideas and keeps track of channel analytics on a planner.⁶¹ For social media celebrity, popularity and audience reception can be easily quantified and reflected through various popularity metrics such as the number of views, subscribers and likes. These are important factors in evaluating a beauty vlogger's market value, used as an index for marketers to identify social media influencers (Booth and Matic 2011). The involvement of audience reception in the production of celebrity content is not new, as reality TV has paved the way to this 'demotic turn' (Turner 2010, 2014). Contest shows have long been incorporating audience votes through the internet, telephone and SMS (Hartley 2008). What is new for social media celebrity is the ability to maintain such engagement continuously. It is also common for vloggers to maintain multiple media presences on different platforms. For example, a quick 'popping-into' the local drugstore is tweeted, and products instagrammed at close-up, potentially leading up to a beauty haul or review video based on audience reaction. The multi-platform representation, afforded by handy mobile devices, also enables a vlogger to be connected with subscribers and followers continuously and in real time. In this sense, the cultural logic of social media celebrity is characterized by their ever present and accessible connectedness to audiences.

5.5.3 From scarcity to abundance

In mass media, the competition for fame is fierce and the career as a celebrity precarious. One reason for the highly replaceable and disposable nature of celebrity is traditional media and entertainment industries' business model which features big investment in premium content. On the one hand, the silver screen or television are not scalable media, thus accommodating only limited numbers of celebrities. On the other hand, to secure profits and reduce risks, content production is highly formulaic (Gamson 1994). The producers therefore also need formulaic celebrity personalities but ever fresh new faces. This may explain why modern celebrity is criticized for being differentiated from one another by marginally different personalities (Boorstin 1971).

⁶¹ Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jWt8HkOsW14>, viewed on 30 January 2017.

Social media celebrities also tend to be homogeneous, as described by the audience in the Reddit discussion thread (Figure 5.4) as ‘cookie-cutter-clone’ beauty vloggers, as well as the internet red face that I have discussed in the previous chapter. However, due to the industrial logic of YouTube and MCNs, the homogeneous social media personalities will not be disposed and replaced by new ones. Instead, multiple ones can be aggregated to market verticals and monetized together. This is the same logic of the long tail business model characterizing e-commerce websites like eBay or Amazon, where products in low demand or low sales volume can collectively make up a market share and rival with the bestsellers. Moreover, the scalability of MCN and YouTube also means they can hold ever-increasing numbers of personalities. Of course, this does not mean the absence of hierarchy in the status of social media celebrity. The scarcity can be reintroduced with the pyramid service model of MCNs, where big personalities receive 360-degree personal services with many brand cooperation opportunists, while smaller channels participate in the network independently with the help of automated online tools (Lobato 2016).

5.5.4 From meritocracy to self-sufficient uniqueness

When we argue that social media celebrities perform ordinariness in their vlogs, it is easy to forget that the film star was also a token of ordinary people. The rags-to-riches story of the soda fountain girl was the antithesis to aristocracy in the early 20th century. Celebrities on screen are ordinary people in the sense that they have achieved their status through self-effort instead of bloodline. Therefore, ordinariness in traditional celebrity culture has an emphasis on meritocracy. Of course, we may also argue that celebrity is a result of sheer fabrication within the cultural industry, which can happen to any ordinary person with mediocre ability and without much effort. Celebrity in this case has nothing to do with merits. Nevertheless, the result of celebrity manufacturing is a larger-than-life representation which features extraordinariness.

In social media celebrity culture, ordinariness is about both less and more than meritocracy. As to media discourse outside of the digital world, mainstream news articles still narrate YouTubers like Dane Boedigheimer in a self-made (wo)man script (Morreale 2014). But the story has a twist to it – the ‘this just happened’ effect – as YouTubers are motivated by a desire of personal expression and creativity, not the ambition to achieve material gains. Within the digital world, I notice from my fieldwork that vloggers claim efforts not to achieve the *best* of something, but to be *oneself*. Both vloggers and viewers are very cautious about making personal judgments on beauty and fashion styles. Some vloggers refuse the role as a makeup expert, and they simply share how they do it and what is suitable for them. This may be partly due to the fact that what I have observed are cultural activities related to consumerism, which is legitimated by a discourse of consumption entitling self-expression and personal agency. In this scenario, no one is better than another as every ordinary person is endowed with his or her uniqueness. Also importantly, the technical affordances of social media encourage users to be self-expressive about cultural taste and identity, so that

these preferences and behavioral data can be capitalized for commercial use (Van Dijck 2013). Therefore, social media celebrities' sense of ordinariness is not about someone with a humble beginning climbing the social ladder. Instead, it embraces the self-sufficient uniqueness endowed to every ordinary person.

5.6 Summary

In this chapter, I have shown that social media like YouTube has given rise to a new type of celebrity with its distinct industrial structure and cultural logic. Taking beauty vloggers as an example, I have demonstrated that their celebrity status is situated at the industrial conjuncture of the social media platform, commercial cultural intermediaries, and beauty and fashion consumer market. Digital ethnography was conducted at multiple sites including vloggers' YouTube channels, interview articles with vloggers, audience discussion forums on Reddit and GuruGossip, and YouTube analytic websites. It is found that many famous beauty vloggers are managed by MCNs and they incorporate branded content and participate in offline brand activities. The vloggers create content with entrepreneurial calculation and a prospect of channel growth. A series of contradictions are negotiated between a vlogger's role as a community leader and a brand ambassador, between personal innovation and the cultural and technical normativities of beauty vlogging. The vloggers also envision the segmentation of the beauty consumer market so as to attract a wide range of audiences with varied purchasing power. Moreover, the vloggers react to the seasonal fluctuation of CPM rate actively which yields new content and new genres in the beauty community on YouTube.

Social media celebrity is the latest metamorphosis of fame in the networked society, which is characterized by the new cultural logic distinguishing it from traditional celebrity. The boundary between the celebrity's private and public image has collapsed and authenticity is staged in the purportedly non-scripted vlogs. Rather than keeping a managed distance from the audience, social media celebrities maintain managed connectedness with viewers and subscribers. Audience reception is attached with more weight in deciding a vlogger's success due to easily quantifiable popular metrics of the platform. As we see more figures perform celebrity practices in more fields of the public sphere, the industrial model of social media and MCNs provides monetization solutions through aggregation and scalability. Therefore, social media celebrity is characterized by abundance rather than scarcity. Moreover, the new version of fame in the digital world trumpets liberal democracy and modern individualism to a new level by bringing every user the possibility of differentiating oneself from the rest of the network. The sense of meritocracy in modern celebrity culture has been diluted, and self-effort is replaced by self-sufficient uniqueness.

So far, in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, I have shown that social media celebrity continues the representation of an intimate and private self-underscoring modern celebrity culture. We can still pin down the substantive meanings signified by their faces, which

are not as stunning and perfect as those of film stars, but indeed represent new forms of subjectivity in the digital age. Social media celebrity is also a form of commodity that is manufactured in a converged industrial infrastructure. However, new temporalities and cultural logic of the celebrities are contributed by the unique business model of the IT industry and technical features of social media platforms. In the next chapter, I shall demonstrate that fame on the internet can be achieved without displaying embodied images. The conditions to fame thus also seem to move simultaneously away from the century-old obsession with appearance and personality, as well as industrially manufactured human commodity, to algorithm-tailored publicity maneuvers and appeals to wider public concerns.

Navigating through platform popularity metrics and public concerns

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I explore the fame of Weibo political microbloggers in China, who express a dissenting voice through commentaries on current affairs and historical events. The spread of modern celebrity culture has led to a situation where politicians and intellectuals nowadays also adopt various celebrification techniques to communicate with the public (Cashmore 2006; Van Krieken 2012). It may be exaggerated to claim that a presidential candidate's tie needs to be as appealing as his political agenda. However, I indeed clearly remembered my confusion when firstly watching Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*.⁶² As a first-year English major student sitting in a Chinese classroom at that time, I believed that it must be global warming that killed his son.

This anecdote from my student times does not aim at revealing how bad my English is or criticizing the film for blending highly personalized messages into a public appeal. Rather, I would like to point out a way of thinking which has been guiding our discussion about the celebritytization of politics. That is, celebrity culture draws the public's attention to the faces of politicians, rather than their words. I misunderstood the film because in China, this is seldom the case. The personality cult devoted to political leaders has become a taboo after Mao Zedong's era and most of the political messages nowadays are highly impersonal, if not hypernormalized (Yang, Tang and Wang 2015).⁶³ However, the celebrity culture and social media technologies in China are actively participating in globalized trends. I believe this unique conjuncture has given me

⁶² *An Inconvenient Truth* is a documentary film by director Davis Guggenheim. The film tries to convince the audience that global warming is indeed happening as a result of human activities on the Earth. The film incorporates American former vice-president Al Gore's life stories, featuring his commitment to reversing the effect of global warming. In the beginning of the film, Gore's devotion to the cause of climate change is contrasted with his personal loss, i.e. the death of his six-year-old son. The film can be watched at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cz2u2HeaSiY>, and the introduction to the film on <https://www.algore.com/library/an-inconvenient-truth-dvd>, viewed on 17 October 2017.

⁶³ The criticism of the personality cult towards Mao Zedong was firstly made public in 1977, in the document titled *The Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party since the Founding of the People's Republic of China*, during the 6th plenary session of 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China. In recent years, we indeed witness some changes in the media representation of political leaders in China. For instance, there are cartoon images of

an opportunity to see new conditions to fame which may be easily ignored in a context of mediatized electoral politics. For instance, no matter how much Hillary Clinton's supporters made fun of Donald Trump's flowy hairstyle on Facebook, he still won the election and left them astonished in the filter bubbles of like-minded supporters (Pariser 2012). Social media do not organize users' attention through a centralized power of dissemination like that of mass media; rather, platforms' algorithms can exert great influence on what and how users see things. In this chapter, I will demonstrate that for political microbloggers in China, the navigation through Weibo's popularity metrics and public concerns is a critical strategy to high media visibility. Drawing this implication from online political communication, we may begin to think that celebrity culture's century-old obsession with mortal faces is shifting towards an obsession with the numbers next to the little thumbs-up button.

In this chapter, I investigate how Weibo political microbloggers ascend to fame with their words instead of embodied images. Here, I consider their fame as high media visibility and influence in the field of political deliberations on Weibo. More specifically, I analyze the process through which microbloggers build Weibo accounts from scratch, filling in contents, attracting followers, and interacting with fellow microbloggers. Importantly, I analyze the rhetorical strategies in their writings, and, how such strategies fit into the technical features of social media as well as prevalent public concerns in contemporary China. Before diving into the analysis, in the next section, I will firstly situate the emergence of this new public figure in China's online space against both global and local socio-technical contexts. Political microbloggers' dissident role is closely associated with the expectation for microblogging platforms as empowering political activism as well as the specific media ecology in China.

6.2 Contextualizing Weibo political microbloggers

6.2.1 Political dissidents online

The emergence of political microbloggers as a new type of public figure in China's online space is of great significance. The individual opinion leaders, especially those who hold a dissenting voice towards the government, can now attract a large audience independently, bypassing the state-owned media institutions. To a certain extent, we may regard political microbloggers as an earlier trope of social media celebrity in China, predating today's internet reds. Before the concept of internet red acquired popularity, the influential and highly visible figures on Weibo were called 'Big V'. 'Big'

Xi Jinping had his wife Peng Liyuan. After each diplomatic activity the president and his wife have attended, the First Lady's outfit always becomes a trending topic on the internet. One of the factors contributing to this change may be the semiotic and participatory potentials of social media. It may be also due to the fact that the First Lady was a famous singer in CPC Central Military Commission Political Department Song and Dance Troupe, who is indeed familiar with the strategies of media representation and celebrification.

refers to the fact that these microbloggers have large follower bases, and 'V' means their offline identities are verified by Sina Weibo.

Political microbloggers' ascendance to high media visibility is contemporaneous with the optimistic expectations regarding microblogging platforms as empowering political activism in Western countries.⁶⁴ Although social media's role in facilitating protest organization and mobilization has been re-evaluated by scholars and journalists as an exaggerated one (Fuchs 2014; Esfandiari 2010),⁶⁵ ironically, Twitter has been blocked in mainland China since 2009, thus contributing to the platform's heroic image as an effective tool for subversive political communication. Discussions on politically sensitive topics then found a place to blossom on domestic microblogging sites, such as Sina Weibo and Tencent Weibo.⁶⁶ It is at this conjuncture of the globalized social media technology, the rhetoric of digital optimism, as well as China's internet censorship policy that the new public figure of political microblogger appears in China's online space. We may note that although Big V could refer to any type of social media celebrity on Weibo, 'public intellectual and Big V' has become a compound word in Chinese, indicating that political deliberation was one of the dominant ways to fame on the internet around the early years of 2010s. In July 2013, several famous microbloggers were invited by a program of China Central Television Station to discuss the social responsibilities of online opinion leaders, suggesting mainstream media's attention to political bloggers' ability to shape public opinion. In August 2013, two microbloggers were arrested in Beijing for disseminating rumors.⁶⁷ From then on, being a political microblogger has become a controversial identity online, attributed as both the hero of freedom of speech and demagogic disseminator of rumor.

6.2.2 Political microbloggers as public intellectuals?

The political microbloggers, together with other public figures including experts, journalists and politically expressive entertainment stars, are often referred to as public intellectuals by Chinese social media users. Nevertheless, based on my observation, there are both differences and similarities between Weibo political microbloggers and

⁶⁴ Source: <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/jun/16/irans-twitter-revolution/>, <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1905125,00.html>, viewed on 15 July 2016.

⁶⁵ Source: <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2010/06/evaluating-irans-twitter-revolution/58337/>, viewed on 15 July 2016.

⁶⁶ Tencent Weibo is a microblogging service provided by Tencent Holdings. Ltd. In the ecology of Chinese social media platforms, Tencent has a dominant position in instant messaging service with products like QQ and Wechat, while the microblogging market is dominated by Sina Weibo. In this book, I refer to Sina Weibo and microblogging functionality in general as Weibo and specify Tencent Weibo when I mention it.

⁶⁷ Source: http://news.xinhuanet.com/legal/2014-04/17/c_126400880.htm, viewed on 15 July 2016.

what have been defined as public intellectuals in academia. Mapping out the relationship between these two public figures is critical for us in understanding the techniques for media visibility and opinion shaping on Weibo.

Scholars have shown that the roles public intellectuals take and their activities in the public sphere vary across societies with different intellectual traditions. The academic definition of public intellectual is also surrounded by debates. Any lament for the absence or decline of intellectuals' public interventions should be made with some caution. A definition with certain common ground may be referred from Collini (2002). Public intellectuals are 'those figures who, on the basis of some recognized standing in a creative, scholarly, or other non-instrumental activity, are also accorded the opportunity to address a wider audience on matters of general concern' (Collini 2002: 209). However, when the contemporary public sphere is increasingly mediatized, new genres and techniques for engaging audiences, some of which are borrowed from celebrity culture, have been adopted by public intellectuals to put their messages across (Heynders 2016). In this case, the boundaries between different types of public figures are now increasingly blurred and the evaluation of a public intellectual should also consider his or her ability to attract audience attention in highly competitive media spaces. Heynders (2016) proposes a scheme for researching a public intellectual from the following perspectives: (1) one's cultural authority and credentials, (2) the social and cultural context one operates in, (3) the mediated context of production and reception, (4) aesthetic features of one's text and public persona.

With the nature of today's media environment and the possible challenges intellectuals may encounter in mind, let's examine a popular definition of 'public intellectual' on Weibo. The definition is both generalized and specified. 'Public intellectual' can refer to any personality or Weibo account discussing politics and current affairs from a position countering that of the mainstream political discourse in China. In this sense, the occupational range for being a public intellectual has widened. We not only see scholars, lawyers, journalists, writers and entertainment celebrities are expressing their political opinions online; so are grassroots microbloggers and content aggregators, too. Even any ordinary Weibo user can be labelled as a public intellectual, as long as one's opinion is in opposition to that of the dominant political discourse. Thus, the political perspectives and agenda of a public intellectual are narrowed down to an anti-government position. Of course, some scholars believe an oppositional stance towards the government indeed characterizes public intellectuals (for instance, Said 1994). However, what I would like to emphasize here is that, firstly, public intellectuals' rich (or controversial) image and complex public engagement that are recognized by both academic and popular discourses in the West are simplified and tokenized into a role of political dissident in China. Secondly, in China public intellectuals are regarded as an online phenomenon. There isn't such a thing as public intellectual on television or in newspapers. In the analysis, I will demonstrate a link between the mere online presence of public intellectuals and their highly polarized and reduced style of argument.

Among a wide array of figures labeled as public intellectuals, I find the role of political microblogger very critical in exploring political communication in China's online space. Political microbloggers are full-time bloggers managing content aggregation Weibo accounts,⁶⁸ with commentaries on current affairs and historical events as primary content. Many of them are grassroots writers, meaning that they do not have a background in academia, literature or journalism. In this sense, political microbloggers' fame as opinion leaders is native to the internet. The blogs are political, since the comments and narratives often lead to critiques on the contemporary political order in China. Evaluating their writings and performance with Heynders' (2016) categorization, I do not think the microloggers live up to the criteria of being public intellectuals. My analysis will show that on the one hand, they don't possess the cultural authority enabling them to conduct rational and independent critiques. Although they are skillful at situating arguments in the contemporary social context and have a historical perspective on social developments, this skill serves more to inflame public concerns rather than offer solutions. Their writings do not follow principled political ideas; instead, opportunistic populism is resorted to appeal to, if not flatter, the public. Sometimes, sensationalism and provocativeness are used in disseminating misinformation and erroneous news reports. In this sense, while we may worry about public intellectuals' ability to engage audiences, what political microbloggers have is only media visibility. Nevertheless, the concept of public intellectual is still relevant for this case study, because political bloggers indeed employ certain traditions of intellectual intervention in modern China. More importantly, as I shall demonstrate in the analysis, the scholars, journalists and lawyers who do pursue principled and rational discussion may need the help of the bloggers to amplify their voice by reposting and other forms of cooperation. Political communication on Weibo is thus no more an activity requiring intellectuals' autonomy but cooperation.

6.2.3 Infotainment and demotic participation

Media censorship and political propaganda are often discussed in previous research of China's media landscape (e.g. Brady 2009a, 2009b); nevertheless, we should realize that China's media industry has also undergone a process of de-regulation and marketization (Zhao 1998; Wang 2008; Edwards and Jeffreys 2010). The phenomena of tabloidization, celebritization of the public culture and the proliferation of infotainment content which characterize Western media indeed all exist in China. Political and current affairs content today is highly commercialized, reaching out to audiences by entertaining instead of informing them (Hallin 1994). Turner (2010) in his analysis of talk radio and political bloggers mentions that as young people in the West lose interest in traditional news programs, they turn to television comedy and satirical programs based on news content as their main sources of information. He situates this scenario

⁶⁸ Content aggregation accounts update posts and collect information based on one or a few topics.

in a wider context of Western audiences' changing relationship with traditional journalism. Concerned about the undesirable concentration of power in the mainstream industry, audiences seem to lose faith in the unbiasedness and independence of the journalistic fourth estate. Consequently, the audiences, especially the young demographics, are seeking ways to distance from or even debunk the ideal of the disinterested and objective news media, rather than restoring and renovating it. In this process, the satirical and provocative talk radios and political blogs gain popularity and legitimate themselves by incorporating audience/ readers' voices into the programs and texts. What are presented in these demotic genres are provocative and divisive opinions rather than information, which often feed public debate and inflame community concerns. In this sense, political and current affairs content is not only morphing into the shape of entertainment, but also exploited to attract audience/user engagement. Often, the bloggers and radio hosts massage the facts or disseminate erroneous news stories, which only function as a jumping off point or a trigger to their opinions. Turner suggests that the wider participation to political communication as well as the proliferation of news content do not ensure that people have access to quality information which a functioning democratic society needs.

In line with Turner's observation, we can identify a similar dwindling interest and trust towards traditional media in China's media landscape. According to Zhang (2010), Chinese mainstream media have specific social and ideological functions. Television news often focuses on cultural propaganda and is instrumental in the construction of grand narratives, thus placing the function of disseminating local, accurate, in-time information in a secondary position. Therefore, audiences may lose interest in mainstream media as they feel a large distance between what is represented in media content and their daily lives. In sharp contrast, social media have become the sites where bad news and scandalous stories are quickly disclosed to the public. In Zhang's words, compared to the formal and celebrative mass media, social media in China are associated with an impression of reflecting 'the real world'. This phenomenon is also explained by Yang, Tang and Wang (2014) as the hyper-normalization of public communication in contemporary China. The official discourses are saturated with rigid and formalized political rhetoric, in the forms of endless slogans and empty-sounding clichés. However, for Chinese news consumers, infotainment genres in the form of satirical programs are not visible in mass media, neither does political talk radio exist. As a result, social media platforms with their interactive and networking affordances become a potential locale for playful news consumption and political dissensus. To summarize, political microbloggers perform in a media environment where subversiveness is welcomed as an authentic stance, and provocativeness is an element in entertaining the audiences. These features, to a certain extent, influence political microbloggers' content and writing style. In the next section, I explain how I approached my research field and conducted observation and data collection. Relevant intellectual traditions and local social discussions will be introduced in association with concrete examples in the data analysis.

6.3 Data collection

The research objective in this case study is to investigate the representations and practices of Weibo political microbloggers. By reading microblog posts and observing the microbloggers' online practices, I try to capture locally situated experiences, locally specific practices and lived local realities of political blogging on Weibo (Varis 2016: 56). Previous research on Weibo opinion leaders often adopts quantitative methods to study a specific online public event. The studies usually adopt media effect models and communication theories regarding agenda setting, news framing, echo chamber effect, and spiral of silence effect (e.g. An 2011; Wei 2011).⁶⁹ Some studies also try to establish and employ a quantitative model to identify opinion leaders on Weibo (Liu and Liu 2011). I believe that an ethnographic approach to Weibo political microbloggers can complete this existing research from two perspectives. Firstly, ethnography deals with the popularity metrics of the social media platforms with certain caution. Specifically, it does not equate 'one number' with 'one person behind the screen'. Subscribers can be purchased from web shops as digital commodities at a relatively low price. Comments and reposts can also be created automatically with the help of software. Thus, the popularity metrics of microbloggers are not neutral indicators of social media users' influence, but should be examined in detail as a strategy to media visibility. Secondly, the in-depth analysis of microblog posts can contextualize the political bloggers' rhetorical strategies and content with social and historical explanations.

In October 2014, I registered a Weibo account as my research account. Although as a Weibo user, I constantly read news and public affairs content, I did not have an overview of the public figures who participate in public deliberations. Therefore, I searched with key words 'big V', 'public intellectuals', and 'Weibo opinion leaders' on Baidu. The search yielded a handful of names, who were mentioned by news articles and online forum discussions as influential and controversial figures in the field of online public deliberation. I then subscribed to them on my Weibo research account. I also employed the recommendation function of Weibo which fed me with more accounts with similar content. This process is similar to a snowball sampling but making use of the algorithm and connective affordances of social media platforms. With 111 accounts in my subscription list, I then classified them based on the microbloggers'

⁶⁹ The echo chamber effect in communication studies refers to a situation where information, opinions, ideas or beliefs are repeated and reinforced in a like-minded group, to an extent that counter-views are underrepresented. The echo chamber effect reinforces one's world view making it seems universally accepted and correct than it really is. More information available at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Echo_chamber_\(media\)#cite_note-1](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Echo_chamber_(media)#cite_note-1), viewed on 8 December 2017. The spiral of silence effect in communication studies refers to that an individual with the fear of isolation and exclusion will keep silent when his or her opinions are not in accordance with the dominant opinions. More information available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spiral_of_silence#CITEREFNoelle-Neumann1977, viewed on 8 December 2017.

occupation ranging from full-time microbloggers, popular writers, journalists and editors, academic scholars, lawyers, and leading entrepreneurs to entertainment stars. Then I observed the activities and microblog contents in my research account's main page, where the content is fed by these 111 accounts.

Having mapped out a landscape of public deliberation on Weibo and gained a preliminary impression on the microbloggers' style and practices, I then focused on the category of full-time microbloggers, who manage content aggregation accounts specializing in political commentary. This is because firstly, in this study I define social media celebrity as a user whose fame is native to a social media platform. As to academics and entrepreneurs, for instance, their online presence may be already visible among professional networks and then spreads to wider audiences. Secondly, it is in the case of home-grown political microbloggers that I found embodied personal image is no longer a prerequisite as a condition to fame.

Although political and current affairs content is critical and sharp in style, which may help to attract followers, the scale of its reception is still limited compared to entertainment stars or accounts featuring lifestyle content. Consequently, many political microbloggers also diversified their topics by including for instance chicken-soup self-help tips. In this trend of diversification, a microblogger named Baigu Lunjin caught my attention as he was very dedicated to political and current affair content. The name literally means 'display the past, discuss the present' which also indicates the theme of this account. I then observed this Weibo account in detail and found that the blogger also had a Tencent Weibo account, where the blog posts were synchronized with those on Sina Weibo. On 21st January 2015, Baigu Lunjin's Sina Weibo account stopped being active. Several days later, I found that the blogger had died due to illness. His sudden death aroused an online discussion where he was evaluated both positively and ironically as a leading grassroots political microblogger in China's online public sphere. After Baigu Lunjin's death, both his Sina and Tencent Weibo accounts were taken over by his friends. Two months later, the Sina Weibo account was deleted. As I had finished most of observation before the Sina Weibo account was deleted, the blogger's Tencent Weibo then functioned as the main site where I went back to the field for some supplementary information. Due to the deletion of the account, some sources of the collected posts are not available anymore. In the analysis, I will provide the links to the archived posts on Freeweibo.⁷⁰

In this case study, my data consisted of Baigu Lunjin's Weibo activities and posts. My main method to collect data was observation. As Sina and Tencent Weibo feature a time-line function, I can view all the account activities from the launch of the account, except for those that have been deleted by the blogger. In order to become

⁷⁰ FreeWeibo is a website providing unfiltered Weibo search. <https://freeweibo.com/en/>. It can return search results which have been deleted or censored by the system of Weibo. Some 'normal' posts with high popularity are also cached, among which some of Baigu Lunjin's posts are available.

familiar with Baigu Lunjin's writings, I have read all the posts appearing on the first five pages of each month's log data from June 2012 to January 2015 on Sina Weibo. Sometimes, the posts may provide hyper-links to the news sources, so I also clicked on the links to check the original news stories. For posts without information about original sources, I tried to search on Baidu to locate where the story came from. In doing so, I can gain knowledge on how Baigu Lunjin formulates and frames news reports. In this way, I identified the recurrent themes in Baigu Lunjin's posts and then saved the screenshots of the posts which I considered as being representative of the blogger's rhetorical style and content.

6.4 Navigating through Weibo's popularity metrics

Unlike academic intellectuals and journalists, whose authority and credentials are originally gained offline, grassroots microbloggers build their personal brands and attract followers solely through their online activities. Research on public intellectuals often discusses academic intellectuals' uncomfortable relationship with media. For instance, Bourdieu (1996) believes that 'fast thinkers' tend to reduce and simplify their arguments according to the logic of television programming. Weibo also has its own cultural logic. What is relevant here is that fame on this microblogging platform is shaped by several popularity metrics including: *number of followers*, *number of comments* and *number of reposts*. Straightforwardly, famous political microbloggers are called Big V, not because they have credentials in political communication, but only because they have big follower bases. Moreover, Fuchs (2014) suggests that the visibility one can get on Twitter for instance is stratified, as users with more followers get more retweets, their voices thus being amplified. In this sense, although any user can express political opinions on Weibo, only the highly visible ones can be heard widely.

In my fieldwork, I have read Baigu Lunjin's archived posts and account activities to understand how he has built a highly visible account from scratch. I found that Baigu Lunjin often tags other famous microbloggers in his posts. In this way, he is able to gain visibility by being reposted. Importantly, this tagging practice is a strategy to maintain reciprocity and build solidarity among fellow microbloggers. Without a centralized power to disseminate information to a large audience like in mass media, Weibo opinion leaders including academics, journalists, writers and politically expressive entertainment stars need to set up a network of alliance, so that they can promote each other's posts. Once an event, a topic or an opinion is reposted among the network of highly visible bloggers, it creates an echo chamber effect. The reposted content can then easily appear in the trending topic chart and the trending post chart on Weibo, thus being broadcasted to more users. Online political deliberation is learning from marketing strategies, namely cross-promotion in this case. Political microbloggers like Baigu Lunjin may help to feed alternative news resources to journalists and scholars; meanwhile the microbloggers can get more publicity. Similarly, the current affairs content entitles entertainment stars with the image of being attentive to issues

of public concern, and the stars' voice is lent over to bloggers who provide the resources for further dissemination of the messages.



BaiguLunjin: *A civil servant can save many masters. //Commenter F: China is not moving that fast, rather, those who hold sickle and axe appropriated too much. //Commenter D: Follow the U.S... //Commenter B: //Commenter A*



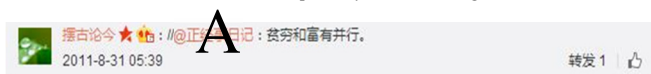
Commenter E: *China is not walking that fast, rather those who hold sickle and axe have appropriated too much. //Commenter B:// Commenter D: Follow the U.S...//Commenter B: //Commenter A...*



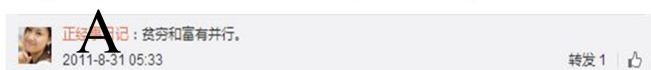
BaiguLunjin: *// Commenter D: Follow the U.S. and eat shit, they can't get it if too slow. // Commenter B:// Commenter A: poverty and wealth go hand in hand.*



Commenter C: *Follow the U.S. and eat shit, can't get it if too slow. // Commenter B: // Commenter A: poverty and wealth go hand in hand.*



BaiguLunjin: *//Commenter A: Poverty and wealth go hand in hand.*



Commenter A: *Poverty and wealth go hand in hand.*

Figure 6.1 The comments showing traces of astroturfing (translations are below the original thread)

The close association between media visibility and the platform's popularity metrics also leads to the phenomenon that some bloggers may conduct astroturfing activities,⁷¹ i.e. one can buy subscribers as virtual commodities from web shops. Comments and reposts can be also generated by astroturfing. As I read Baigu Lunjin's posts from August 2011, I discovered that many comments are by the same group of followers, among which the exact same comments are repeated by several different people. Figure 6.1 shows the comments to one of Baigu Lunjin's posts. From the clustered comments, we can see that commenter C and D, and commenter E and F leave the same comment.⁷² When I click into these commenters' accounts, it turns out that many of them have already been deleted; others are not very active and consist of only reposted content from Baigu Lunjin. This is a clear sign of them being supportive astroturf accounts. Two commenters in this list attract my attention the most. A (account name @zhengjingshiriji) is always the first to leave comments on Baigu Lunjin's posts. B's screen name is the same as the one appearing in the watermark of Baigu Lunjin's microblog pictures. Searching these two commenters on the search engine Baidu, I find both accounts pointing to Baigu Lunjin's other online identities. Specifically, @zhengjingshiriji is the URL name for Baigu Lunjin on Tencent Weibo. These traces suggest that the blogger has registered several Weibo accounts and left comments with these identities on his own microblog posts.

Based on the analysis, I argue that political microbloggers actively adapt their online activities to Weibo's algorithm and popularity metrics. The strategy of networked alliance may lead to ideological polarization, in the sense that rather than challenging one another's opinions with the multiplicity of facts and perspectives, political discussions on Weibo are divided into two extremes. A related concept here is the filter bubble effect (Pariser 2011). It describes a status of information isolation as the result of social media's algorithmic curation, which feeds users with information matching their previous behaviors and preferences. Social media's automatic personalization function may work effectively in predicting and cultivating users' purchasing behaviors. Once applied in political communication, it reduces the chance for the publics to encounter ideologically cross-cutting content. The more users are assigned to homogeneous groups, the more the diversity of opinions will give way to group thinking, and the less they are inclined to discuss ideas with other groups of different opinions. This will result in ideological polarization (Spohr 2017).

⁷¹ AstroTurf is a brand for artificial grass surface used in sports fields. The word is then used to refer to practices with masked sponsors which appear to be mass-supported and emerge in a bottom-up manner, while in fact constituting artificially generated public opinion. In other words, astroturfing is fake grassroots. Further reference can be gained from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Astroturfing>, viewed on 19 October 2017.

⁷² See the underlined parts in the English translation. Original source: http://www.weibo.com/8988498p?is_all=1&stat_date=201108#feedtop. The post cannot be viewed online anymore due to the fact that Baigu Lunjin's Sina Weibo account was deleted.

As the filter bubble effect draws our attention to how social media algorithms shape users' selective information reception, in the case of Weibo political microbloggers, we can see that content creation on social media also needs to be tailored to the algorithmic logic. Firstly, the cross-promotion strategy enables a microblogger to receive media visibility manually with the help of fellows. Secondly, by purposefully interacting with like-minded microbloggers and posting homogeneous content, one has more of a chance to automatically appear in Weibo's recommendation list for subscription. Therefore, although microbloggers speak with their words not their embodied images, they still need to speak in a way which situates them in the algorithmically engineered connectivity of Weibo (Van Dijck 2013). For the aim of media visibility, as I will also demonstrate in the next section, microbloggers do not generate arguments based on factual information in news content, nor are the arguments supported by principled political ideas. Instead, the priority is to firstly choose a side from the polarized political ends. This is why Chinese public intellectuals, whose existence is a social media phenomenon, are reduced to opinion leaders with an anti-governmental agenda in a duel against the so-called 50 cents party, who are believed to astroturf pro-government commentaries for an economic reward of 50 cents per post.

6.5 Dissenting voice and its rhetorical strategies

In the previous section, I have discussed how microbloggers' media visibility and influence are largely contributed to by their active navigation through Weibo's popularity metrics. This refers to more than simply buying the most followers or astroturfing the most likes, although they are indeed straightforward methods. What also matters here is that the algorithmic agency has far-reaching influence on how and what can be discussed when microbloggers express opinions towards the sociopolitical situations in contemporary China. In this section, I will show that microbloggers mainly adopt a dissenting voice to attract audiences' attention. More specifically, I explore the rhetorical strategies they use and why dissensus works better than choosing the other side of the political spectrum.

6.5.1 Revealing the historical truth

As mentioned, the microblogger's screen name Baigu Lunjin means 'displaying the past, discussing the present'. We may understand the past and current themes as being juxtaposed to each other, since the microblog content covers both historical writings and current affairs commentaries. The interpretation can be also understood as 'displaying the past, so as to discuss the present'. This meaning can be supported by an often-cited quote in Tang Dynasty's historiography, 'one can straighten out his outfit by turning copper into a mirror, one can know the rise and fall of a regime by taking history as a mirror, one can know his advantages and disadvantages by turning another

person into a mirror.⁷³ In this sense, historical events function as a resource for Chinese intellectuals and politicians to learn lessons regarding seizing and losing political power.

Moreover, historical writing is also a site of power struggle, where an account of the past is shaped by current aims, agendas and preoccupations. I find that political bloggers express dissenting voices by re-constructing historical narratives. To understand this strategy, reference to the political stance of the mainstream historiography in modern China is useful. Mainstream historians define Chinese society in the period from 1840 to 1949 as a 'semi-colony and semi-feudal society'.⁷⁴ They adopt Marxist theory to define the major social contradictions in society as the contradiction between the foreign imperialists and the Chinese nation; and between the landlord, warlord classes and the proletariat class. In this context, socialism, hence the political regime of the Chinese Communist Party, is legitimized as the only way to solve these social contradictions and fight for national independence and modernization. However, a strand of historiography proposes a paradigmatic shift in the study on modern Chinese history (1840-1949) from Marxist theory to modernization theory. These studies consider revolutions and civil wars as the impediment of capitalist development in China (Li and Liu 1995) and recognize the positive construction of modernity during the colonial period (Zheng 1994). It's not difficult to see that the historical narrative underpinned by the modernization theory is a critical challenge to the legitimacy of the political power of the contemporary regime (Yan and Mei 2015). In my fieldwork, I find that Baigu Lunjin adopts this strategy of reconfiguring major historical events in a way that is contradictory to the dominant historical narrative, so that the legitimacy of the contemporary political power can be challenged or undermined. I shall discuss two examples of this in detail.

In his microblog (Figure 6.2),⁷⁵ Baigu Lunjin posted a picture of Chiang Kai-shek and his family. Chiang Kai-shek was a famous political and military leader in Chinese

⁷³ 《宋·欧阳修·宋祁·新唐书·卷一一零·列传第二十二·魏徵》：“以铜为鉴，可正衣冠；以古为鉴，可知兴替；以人为鉴，可明得失。朕尝保此三鉴，内防己过。今魏徵逝，一鉴亡矣”，translated by the author.

⁷⁴ A semi-colony is, in Marxist theory, a country which is officially an independent and sovereign nation, but which is in reality very much dependent and dominated by another (imperialist) country (or, in some cases, several imperialist countries). Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semi-colony>, viewed on 19 October 2017. According to Bedggood (1978), semi-colony is a result of capitalist attempt 'to overcome temporary barriers to expansion by seeking new markets, new sources of labor-power, raw materials and foodstuffs' (p. 258). Petras (2007) points out two features characterizing the semi-colony status of China, which are European enclaves and coastal concessions.

⁷⁵ Source: http://www.weibo.com/8988498p?is_all=1&stat_date=201109#feedtop, data retrieved on 4 November 2014, The original post is no more available; however, similar microblog posts referring to Chiang Kai-shek can be found in Baigu Lunjin's Tencent Weibo account. Source:

history. In December 1949, as the leader of the Chinese Nationalist Party (also known as Kuomintang Party), Chiang and the regime of the Republic of China retreated to Taiwan. Mainstream historians in mainland China hold negative evaluations of this historical figure, as he was considered as being reluctant to fight against the Japanese invaders during the Second World War and having suppressed the military and political movements of the Chinese Communist Party. However, the microblogger challenges this negative image by presenting his commemoration of Chiang. From the concise text in the microblog, we can see Baigu Lunjin evaluates Chiang positively, since he uses a euphemism referring to Chiang's death as '*went to heaven*'. Then the second half of the sentence draws a sharp contrast, as '*we have gone to hell*'. This microblog post conveys a very simple idea that without Chiang and the related political power of Kuomintang, Chinese people's life is as miserable as hell.



Figure 6.2 Chiang Kai-shek and his family

(Translation: You went to heaven, whereas we have gone to hell)

Here we may reflect upon the blogger's style of dealing with historical narrative. The first thing we may note is that even in Taiwan, Chiang is considered as a controversial figure by historians and politicians of different political camps. However, the complex political struggles and local discussions in Taiwan are not relevant in this context. The rhetorical strategy in the post is what I call selective simplification. Only a very limited

<http://t.qq.com/p/t/220460034745021>, data retrieved on 9 July, 2016; <http://t.qq.com/zhengjings hiriji?filter=0&date=20121104>, data retrieved on 15 July, 2016.

perspective on a historical figure or event is mentioned, depending on the current point of argument in a local context. In this example, the blogger does not aim at discussing Chiang and his political career; rather Chiang's image has been used instrumentally as a token antithesis to the contemporary political regime in China. To express dissenting opinion is then to challenge and to subvert a dominant definition of this token. Other historical figures such as warlords and local mafia leaders, who are also defined by the dominant narrative as 'the enemy of the people', are also mentioned in the same way in Baigu Lunjin's posts.



Figure 6.3 The 'Old Society' and the 'New Society'

(Translation: After 'The Northern Expedition' ended, Kuomintang government established the capital in Nanjing. Until 1935, the society can be regarded as stable. If Japan had not invaded China in the latter two years, the development of Chinese society would have been totally different. The ordinary life and the peaceful atmosphere documented by this picture are representative of that period, which is widely divergent from the common understanding of the period as 'evil old society')

Figure 6.3 shows another piece of historical writing regarding the Kuomintang and the Republic of China. Baigu Lunjin supposes that after the Northern Expedition,⁷⁶ if Japan

⁷⁶ Source: http://www.weibo.com/8988498p?is_all=1&stat_date=201109#feedtop, data retrieved on 18 November 2014. The original post is no longer available; however, it is still archived on Freeweibo.com <https://freeweibo.com/en/weibo/3362494087571782>, viewed on 4 November 2017. This is not a censored post. See below for a discussion on the censoring of some of his posts.

had not invaded China, the development of Chinese society would have been different.⁷⁷ Here, the microblogger does not point out the difference explicitly, but only emphasizes the stability of Kuomintang government at that time. According to Strauss (1997), the republican government established by the Kuomintang party was considered by some scholars as having long-term promise until it was undercut by Japanese invasion in 1937. We may infer that the microblogger believes the Communist Red Army would not have grown into full-fledged force without the Second World War, and it would not have won the civil war against the Kuomintang army. In this case, a different development of China implied by the microblogger means a political regime ruled by the Kuomintang party instead of the contemporary People's Republic of China (henceforth PRC).

Baigu Lunjin then further demonstrates what this alternative development may have looked like by presenting the picture as a piece of historical data. He suggests that what we see in the picture is very different from the impression of the 'evil old society'. Old society is a concept in the dominant historical account of the social situation before the establishment of PRC. It summarizes the undesirable social conditions under which people lived a miserable life, and explains such suffering with the dominant class' exploitation at that time. According to Hao and An (2008), 'old society' is a type of 'negative legitimacy', which is one of the most important legitimizing resources for the Chinese Communist Party's political power. It is critical for the establishment and reinforcement of the socialist political order by the new regime. The 'old society' may indeed characterize people's lived experiences at that time, but the influence of this concept is derived from strategic political mobilization, so that citizens can develop the consciousness of class and class struggle. The recognition and embracement of the 'new society' are then shaped by a hatred towards the 'old society'. The happy children in the picture and the suggested stable society in Baigu Lunjin's post function to challenge the authenticity of 'old society', and thus further challenge the legitimacy of the contemporary political regime.

However, here we arrive at the question of representation with the combination of word and picture. Bourdieu (1996) reminds us that 'photos are nothing without words' (p. 20). While we may not accept his diagnosis on the mediatization of the public sphere, it is important for us to notice how Weibo political microbloggers like Baigu Lunjin employ historical pictures as an authenticating tool. As I have searched the picture on Baidu, it was indeed taken around 1935 in a school in Nanjing. However, we can't judge the nature of a historical period from only one picture. What the readers

⁷⁷ The Northern Expedition was a Kuomintang (KMT) military campaign, led by Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, from 1926–1928. Its main objective was to unify China under its own control by ending the rule of the Beiyang government as well as the local warlords. It led to the end of the Warlord Era, the reunification of China in 1928 and the establishment of the Nanjing government. Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northern_Expedition, viewed on 13 May 2016. More information can be referred from Strauss' (1997) analysis on the evolvement of republican government in China during the period from 1919 to 1949.

of this post may acquire is merely an impression of a happy atmosphere. For Baigu Lunjin, this minimum but immediate visual information functions well to challenge the ‘old society’ discourse. This is again a strategy of selective simplification, where a historical figure or event is decontextualized and used as a trigger for the blogger’s opinion in a local context.



Figure 6.4 Baigu Lunjin’s second Sina Weibo account

(Translation: It doesn’t matter that posts were deleted and voices were muted. Anyway, we have staggered along those difficulties...If one day my current Weibo account disappears, please follow me at another account: @有话憋住. On Weibo, I will not say goodbye to my followers)

Meanwhile Baigu Lunjin also explicitly challenges media censorship. For instance, in July 2013, he updated a post announcing his second Sina Weibo account (Figure 6.4).⁷⁸ He expressed that some of his posts were deleted and sometimes his account was suspended, but that didn’t matter. He would not surrender to the censorship practices on Sina Weibo. Even if this current account might be deleted one day, he would meet his followers at the new account. The name of the new account he announces is ‘stop your words’, which both satires the censorship practices on Weibo and portrays himself as someone whose words will not be stopped.

I suggest political dissensus can help Baigu Lunjin to attract audience attention because he makes use of the liberating rhetoric associated with social media platforms. As discussed, when Weibo firstly acquired popularity around 2010, social media in

⁷⁸ Data retrieved on 18 November 2014, original source not available. The post is archived on <https://freeweibo.com/en/weibo/3596080199460917>, viewed on 4 November 2017. This is not a censored post.

China was sharply contrasted to mainstream media in terms of content style and function in disseminating information. Bad news and scandalous stories on Weibo were complementary to the formal and empty-sounding narratives on mass media, the former thus conveying a sense of authenticity to the public. Baigu Lunjin's content is consistent with such a market position for social media. He employs the platform's affordances for disseminating images relatively freely and conveniently, and takes the stance of revealing historical truths by posting pictures that may not get a chance to be published in traditional media. The more divergent the content from the mainstream discourse, the more it fits into the impression of the 'wild wild web'. In this way, although Baigu Lunjin does not display his embodied image on Weibo, his media visibility is contributed to by the highly controversial content and his role of being a brave dissident.

6.5.2 Navigating through public concerns

In this section, I will analyze the rhetorical strategies in Baigu Lunjin's commentaries on current affairs. Similar to his stance in revealing the truths in history, he also adopts a position to disclose and expose 'the real world' when commenting on news stories. More importantly, he is skillful at choosing the topics that appeal to wide public concerns, thus participating in the media hype around news reports.

This update was posted on 25 July 2012 by Baigu Lunjin on his Tencent Weibo (Figure 6.5),⁷⁹ in connection to a news hype about a heavy urban waterlogging disaster in Beijing a few days earlier, which had caused a breakdown of the city transportation system and more than twenty deaths due to an old and malfunctioning sewage infrastructure. In the post, the blogger claims that the German colonialists have contributed to the modernization process of the city of Qingdao with a down-to-earth action: building city infrastructure instead of cosmetic works like high buildings and squares, to which today's local Chinese governments are dedicated. Again, we can identify the blogger's challenge to the dominant conceptualization of the colonial history in China.

The German-built city sewage system in Qingdao has become a recurrent news story since 2010, especially in the rainy season in summer. There are even different versions of it. The most famous one is that some accessories in the sewer needed to be replaced, but the German company that built it has retreated from the Chinese market. However, Chinese engineers received an email from Germany responding to their inquiries that according to German standards, within three meters to the site, there should be a wax paper package in which the accessories are stored. The Chinese engineers then actually discovered the package and the metal accessories were brand new although they had been stored for nearly one hundred years. This is of course a myth. The German-built sewers were made of concrete without metal accessories and only three kilometers of the original system are left, which only account to 1/1000 of the sewage system in Qingdao. The reason that Qingdao seldom suffers from city

⁷⁹ Source: <http://t.qq.com/p/t/32417056396321>, data retrieved on 5 January 2015.

waterlogging is because the city is built on hills and the sewage can easily flow into the sea.



Figure 6.5 The German-built sewage system in Qingdao

(Translation: The Germans were very unconventional. They ruled Qiangdao for only 17 years; however, they neither built houses or high buildings, nor squares decorated with fountains and lights. Instead they built an underground sewage system under the ground which no one could see. One hundred years later, all Chinese people see it!)

Another post on Baigu Lunjin's Tencent Weibo account also praises the German construction technology as shown in Figure 6.6. In this post, the blogger introduces the removable flood walls alongside (according to the blogger) the Danube River in Germany.⁸⁰ Of course, the information is erroneous, as the picture was taken in Austria. Some followers correct the blogger and suggest that this should be the Rhine, because the Danube does not flow across Germany, but the Rhine does. This is an interesting point that we may delve into deeper. Both the blogger and his followers tend to believe that the high technology removable flood wall should be in Germany. It seems that the idealized perfectionist image is so strong among the Chinese public that the advanced construction technology can only be invented by German people.

⁸⁰ <http://t.qq.com/p/t/289721120304908>, data retrieved on 5 January 2015.



Figure 6.6 Danube River flood in ‘Germany’

(Translation: There is a flood in the Danube River. This is the German government’s emergency control measure)

European readers who are familiar with the local discussions of German society may think this is a naively simplified image of Germany. Interestingly, German media also reacted to this widely transmitted myth of German perfectionism in China. A news article in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* mentions that apart from the sewage system story, a blog on Sina.com even describes everyday life in Germany with similar stereotypes.⁸¹ For instance, kitchens in German households are equipped with all kinds of gadgets including scales, thermometers, measuring cups and egg timers. The housewives are not cooking; they are doing chemical experiments. This isn’t of course all the truth,

⁸¹ <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/deutschlandbild-der-chinesen-mythos-von-der-deutschen-perfektion-1.2286481>, viewed on 20 May 2016.

says the author, and once Chinese people visit Germany, they will find that there are also thieves and the trains are not always punctual.

Whether considering these posts as misinformation, fake news or internet rumors, the first thing we may notice is that a wider access to current affairs content on social media does not automatically ensure users with a more nuanced understanding of the global world. The German perfectionism myth demonstrates that the microblogger is preoccupied with leveraging public concerns and frustration with sensationalism, rather than providing alternative perspectives and precise factual information. These posts are less about Germany than about domestic social issues. In China, many underground infrastructures are of low quality. Corruption has also been disclosed in connection to many construction projects, where unsuitable materials have been used, causing the breakdown of a whole bridge or building. On the one hand, the microblogger blames the officials in local governments for impractical and inefficient policy making. The leaders are busy at superficial and cosmetic projects (e.g. squares decorated by fountains and colorful lights), which only contributes to the advancement of their political careers and ignores the welfare of local citizens. On the other hand, the low construction quality is believed to be caused by a lack of craftsmanship in contemporary Chinese society. Baigu Lunjin therefore leverages the public's distrust towards the Chinese market and industries, and creates an idealized image of Western society that is to be appreciated.

Sometimes, the microblogger also feeds public frustration with provocative content. The post shown in Figure 6.7 is about the renowned political leader, former Prime Minister of the UK, Margaret Thatcher's comments on China in her speech at Hoover College. It suggests that China will not grow into a world power due to its lack of cultural influence in the world. I then searched the archived document of this speech and found the speech was given in 2000. Thatcher indeed mentioned China, but she acknowledged that China was now a major candidate to become a superpower, but not necessarily one matching the United States.⁸² The speech has nothing to do with whether China can provide new ideas to the world. I also searched with the keyword 'Hoover College' and 'Mrs. Thatcher' on Weibo, and discovered several versions of her comments as shown in Figure 6.8 and Figure 6.9. Fake quotes, especially those from Western politicians, writers and entrepreneurs are not rare on Weibo. Many of them are posted and reposted by bloggers like Baigu Lunjin, who help to extend the reach of misinformation. Quotes from renowned public figures go along with the format of microblogging, where insights and wisdom can be expressed concisely within 140 Chinese characters. Of course, Weibo users are not cultural dupes who believe everything political bloggers post. Some users have reacted to the phenomenon of fake quotes in an ironic way (for instance, in Figure 6.10).

⁸² The archive of the speech can be referred at <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/108388>, viewed on 31 October 2017.



Figure 6.7 Mrs. Thatcher's speech version one

(Translation: While everyone is in remembrance of the powerful iron lady, I recall one of her speeches at Hoover College in the U.S. titled 'Leadership of the Time'. When she talked about China, she said 'You don't have to be concerned about China at all, because in the upcoming decades or even in one hundred years, China cannot provide any new ideas to the world'. Her words may hurt us, but it also makes me think for many years... (reposted)⁸³)

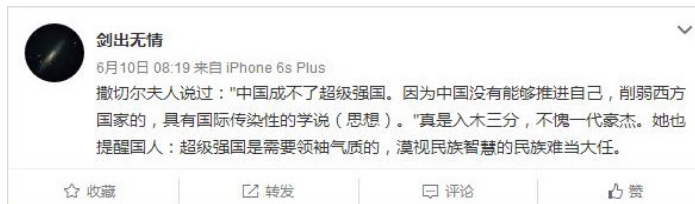


Figure 6.8 Mrs. Thatcher's speech version two

(Translation: Mrs. Thatcher said, 'China cannot become a world super power, because China does not have the social thoughts (spirit) which can improve itself, undermine the West and become popular on the global scale.' This is very insightful. She was really an exceptional leader. She also reminded Chinese people: a super power country needs leadership. A nation that ignores its national wisdom cannot succeed.⁸⁴)

⁸³ Source: http://weibo.com/u/8988498p?is_all=1&stat_date=201304#feedtop, data retrieved on 14 November 2014.

⁸⁴ Source: https://www.weibo.com/u/1159865145?is_all=1&stat_date=201606#1509455726735, data retrieved on 9 July 2016.

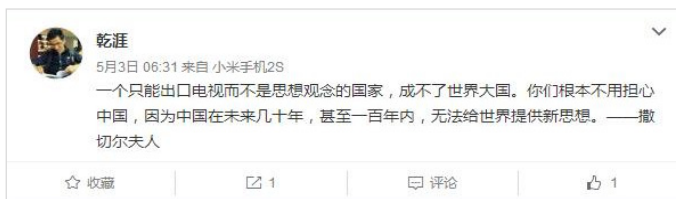


Figure 6.9 Mrs. Thatcher’s speech version three

(Translation: A country which can only export TV sets but not thoughts and ideas cannot become a world super power. You don’t have to worry about China at all, because in the future decades or even in one hundred years, it cannot provide any new ideas to the world. –Mrs. Thatcher⁸⁵)



Figure 6.10 Ironical reaction to the Mrs. Thatcher’s quotes

(Translation: Actually, I am very busy and I can only sleep for four hours per day. I don’t have time to come up with so many famous sayings. I should thank Chinese people who create those quotes for me. You have already provided some news ideas to the world.⁸⁶)

These fake quotes can be summarized as an imagined antagonism between China and the West. Again, this rhetorical strategy fits into the polarized pattern of political deliberation on Weibo. The two ends of the political spectrum are filled with an imagined anti-China stance, and the appeal to nationalist sentiment in contemporary Chinese society. Specifically, by quoting Thatcher and calling her ‘powerful iron lady’ the blogger selectively simplifies the politician’s image. Her controversial political and economic policies are not mentioned. Thatcherism – the rejection of Post-War social welfare consensus in the UK – is also ignored, although in other posts, the blogger constantly criticizes the unequal and incomplete social welfare system in China. In fact,

⁸⁵ Source: https://www.weibo.com/u/3133456361?is_all=1&stat_date=201605#1509456444890, data retrieved on 9 July 2016.

⁸⁶ Source: <http://www.gygqt.gov.cn/Article.asp?id=81983>, data retrieved on 9 July 2016.

we can replace Thatcher with any Western politician. Here, the microblogger leaves the politician's complex image and political agenda behind and boils them down to a symbol of a powerful politician from the ideologically opposing West, who constantly 'worries about China'.

This quote positively draws on a discourse of nationalism. It acknowledges the existence of nationalist sentiment in both popular discussion and mainstream political discourse. For instance, the public concern regarding the lack of innovation drive in domestic industries is prominent. People may feel proud of China's economic achievement, but also recognize the unsustainable economic growth which relies heavily on exporting low added value commodities, for instance TV sets. In the dominant political discourse 'the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' also invokes nationalism. Readers who do not agree with Thatcher's prediction may feel frustrated and quickly argue that this comment is a stigmatization and propaganda against China. Interaction and traffic to this post are thus generated. In Figure 6.8, the fake quote has already been used in a way to remind Chinese people on the critical elements for China to become world super power. It may be ironic to see a political leader who embraced a neoliberal political order and believed there is no such thing as society is now used as a symbol to inflame nationalist sentiment in China's online political discussion. But again, I suggest that the fake quote is created by envisioning and invoking polarized political debates on Weibo, which has nothing to do with either Thatcherism or nationalism.

6.6 Summary

In this chapter I have explored the new conditions to fame through the case of Weibo political microbloggers in China. At first sight, social media seem to introduce an online podium for the public man and woman, who can distance themselves from the representation of intimacy and privateness dominating celebrity culture and the mode of observation cultivated by mass media. Microbloggers like Baigu Lunjin do not present their embodied image on Weibo; rather they attract followers and exert influence on public opinion through words and pictures.

Nevertheless, I have found that social media are cultivating a new mode of arranging audience attention through algorithmic curation and popularity metrics. On the one hand, Baigu Lunjin astroturfs comments to his posts, so as to feed the platform's algorithm with interactive practices. On the other hand, his media visibility is not gained solely through individual effort, but also through the cooperation with like-minded fellow microbloggers. The networked alliance and cross-promotion practices among grassroots microbloggers, academics, journalists, entrepreneurs and entertainment stars demonstrate that algorithmic agency also shapes content creation besides the filter bubble effect on information reception. This reduces the diversity of perspectives and replaces the exchange of different opinions with debates between polarized

political stances, which explains why political microbloggers in China are highly homogeneous in terms of their political agenda. The algorithm-induced political polarization also shapes microbloggers' rhetorical strategies. In both historical writings and commentaries on current affairs, I found that Baigu Lunjin selectively simplifies factual information so as to find a jumping off point to his dissenting opinions, or to formulate an imagined antagonism inflaming debate.

If the algorithm-engineered connectivity of Weibo provides a formula for political microbloggers' deliberation, they indeed need to fill the formula with socioculturally situated content. In other words, I argue that the fame of political microbloggers cannot be reduced to merely algorithm-tailored publicity maneuvers. Firstly, it is the specific media landscape and media policies in China that make a dissident role on the internet attractive to the public. Secondly, the content discussed by these microbloggers is embedded in the context of prevalent public concerns. It is by making use of the public concerns and the public expectation for the disclosure of truth on social media that microbloggers like Baigu Lunjin can gain media visibility with sensationalism and provocativeness.

In the next chapter, I will continue to trace the new way of seeing on social media. *Gangnam Style's* global popularity and its countless versions of parodies indicate that fame on the internet may not necessarily entail pre-determined fixed cultural meanings and acquires memetic features. In the next chapter, I will also move away from the production side of fame and arrive at its consumption side. The consumption practices of social media celebrity will also have implications for a new form of social collectivity in the digital age.

The consumption of social media celebrity and viral fame

7.1 Introduction⁸⁷

In Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, I have discussed how fame on social media share continuities with that of film stars and TV personalities in a convergent cultural and industrial environment. The cultural meanings of internet reds in China are constructed by displaying embodied images, lifestyle and personalities. In this sense, social media celebrity also fulfills an ideological function in legitimating dominant cultural identities in society. Meanwhile, fame on the internet is also supported by an industrial infrastructure. The commercial cultural intermediaries operating around the ad market of YouTube beauty vlogging are redefining traditional media works such as celebrity agency, talent development and legal services with IT industrial models. Nevertheless, Weibo political microbloggers can gain high media visibility and influence without displaying embodied images, but by strategically adapting their public deliberations to the logic of algorithms and popularity metrics. This suggests that the condition to fame on the internet is diverting from modern celebrity culture's century-old obsession with personality and reliance on centralized production and dissemination. However, the microbloggers' fame is still culturally embedded. They assume the social role of political dissident in Chinese society and their audience needs to have certain knowledge in local social discussions.

In this chapter, through the case of *Gangnam Style*, a South Korean pop song by Psy, I will demonstrate that fame on social media can acquire memetic features and achieve virality. A pre-determined cultural meaning of fame is therefore diluted and dissolved into audience's appropriation with varied levels of agency and productivity ranging from intensive derivative works to phatic interactions such as sharing or liking. Although Psy (Park Jae-sang) is an established popular artist in South Korea, he did not have worldwide fame until the global spread of *Gangnam Style* in 2012. Due to the nature of the spread of his video, I regard him as a social media celebrity. Here, I will conduct a semiotic analysis of the music video *Gangnam Style* and its two parodies

⁸⁷ An earlier version of this chapter appeared as M. Hou, Parodic participation as consumption of celebrity products: The case of 'Gangnam Style'. In K.R. Hart (Ed.), *Living in the Limelight: Dynamics of the celebrity experience*. Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2014.

Zwarte Pieten Stijl and *Grass Mud Horse Style*.⁸⁸ In doing so, I try to understand how a social media celebrity product is recontextualized into audiences' local communicative environments. Published on 15th July 2012, the video had generated 1.89 billion views and nearly 785,000 parodies on YouTube until May 2014. There are diverse examples of these parodies, and this chapter will focus on two of them: the Dutch *Sinterklaas* song which is composed by appropriating *Gangnam Style*'s catchy melody,⁸⁹ and a parody in which the Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei rides the invisible horse familiar from the original video with handcuffs in his hands.

These parodies expand the purposes and dimensions of celebrity content consumption. The consumption practice is no longer necessarily confined to niche-interest fandom culture, which is marked by intensive and committed interpretive work, emotional engagement and affective alliance within a fan community (Jenkins 1992; Duffett 2013). Instead, in accordance with Hutcheon's (1978) definition of modern parody, audience participation assumes memetic features, generating derivative versions with a wide range of purposes and capable of displaying a variety of attitudes towards the original text. The evaluative nature of these appropriations can also target an issue beyond the text in wider social discourses by recontextualizing discursive resources from celebrity commodities into localized communicative practices. I suggest that *Gangnam Style* achieved global success firstly because of its heterogeneous textual construct, where semiotic resources are ordered polycentrally to resonate with different audiences. Secondly, its media visibility significantly increased thanks to various forms of audience appropriation. In line with Blommaert (2018), I argue that the viral fame of *Gangnam Style* fulfils the function for social media users to form orders of indexicality and maintain conviviality in light social groups (Varis and Blommaert 2015).

7.2 Participation on social media and its semiotic practices

7.2.1 Fandom, memicity and virality as participatory culture

One may immediately think that the complementary phenomenon of stardom is fandom. According to Duffett (2013: 14), 'media fandom is the recognition of a positive,

⁸⁸ The video of *Zwarte Pieten Stijl* can be viewed at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QqFdsj_i6f4. The video of *Grass Mud Horse Style* can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4LAefTzSwWY>, viewed on 20 March 2014.

⁸⁹ *Sinterklaas* is a Dutch and Belgian festivity, the primary source for the popular icon of Santa Claus during Christmas. Annually, accompanied by his aide 'Black Pete' (*Zwarte Piet*), Saint Nicolas brings gifts to well-behaved children and sends naughty children back to Spain (where he allegedly comes from). During the festivities, numerous *Zwarte Pieten* distribute candies and gifts, and sing, dance and play with children. More information can be referred from <https://www.google.nl/search?q=sinterklaas&oq=sinterklaas&aqs=chrome..69i57j0l5.6778j0j8&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8> viewed on 4 November 2017.

personal, relatively deep and emotional connection with a mediated element of popular culture'. A pathologized interpretation of fandom has long been rejected by many scholars (Caughey 1978; Picirillo 1986; Jenkins 1992; Jenson 1992; Leets et al. 1995; Wood and Skeggs 2004; Hills 2015). I have discussed in Chapter 3 how para-social relationships are not a replacement for 'usual' other types of social interaction in people's lives. Instead, the mediated intimacy that audiences can gain from celebrity-watching functions as a mutual reference and a grammar of conduct in audiences' social lives and is integrated into the matrix of other social interactions. The elitist panic regarding the suggested isolating and delusional effects of celebrity culture is associated with the intellectual concern with social cohesion in modern society. This concern is also traceable in the stereotypical and stigmatized representation of fans in media discourse. Jenson (1992) argues that our unease with fandom is contained in asymptomatic reading of modernity at a deeper level. 'The obsessed loner invokes the image of the alienated, atomized mass man and the frenzied crowd member invokes the image of the vulnerable, irrational victim of mass persuasion' (Jenson 1992: 14). Fans then appear to be culture dupes, social misfits and mindless consumers. In a similar vein but with slightly different understanding of the nature of sociability, Hills (2015) argues that the para-social thesis fails to recognize that the social itself involves imaginary and fantasized aspects.

These images are contested in the classic study of fandom culture by Jenkins (1992). He believes that fans are active producers and manipulators of meanings. He characterizes fandom culture through five dimensions, including: 'its particular reception model of media content, its role in encouraging viewer activism, its function as an interpretive community, and its status as an alternative social community' (Jenkins 1992: 2). In other words, Jenkins has discovered exuberant 'participatory culture' in fandom practices, where audiences are actively involved in the appropriation and dissemination of commercial media content. Participation operates as a set of intertwined and cultural practices, which manifest themselves in new forms of expression, problem solving and affiliation, and have increasing influence over cultural products. To a certain extent, participatory culture is an assertive response to the cultural hegemony of mass communication.

This chapter can benefit from two observations from the above-mentioned discussions. Firstly, our theorization of how celebrity is consumed should not be primed by an (often reductive) conception of how the social world is organized online. It is when we take as our starting point the atomized and isolated individual in mass society that we arrive at a stereotypical imagination of the 'fan in the attic'. Therefore, we should reverse this process by looking closely at how celebrity content is used locally, and then draw implications for social cohesion in the digital age. As Blommaert (2018) argues, abstract and idealized visions of social interactions have been implanted in sociolinguistic research, only to be contested by empirical findings on how people really interact in daily life. Therefore, he suggests that our understanding of social groups and social interaction can draw insights from studies on local interactive practices. This

chapter therefore responds to this call for a reality check by exploring the semiotic practices of consuming celebrity content on social media.

Secondly, we should also not generalize fandom activity as the only means of participatory consumption of celebrity content. Fandom as an interpretive practice of cultural texts may be confined within certain cultural boundaries. It is also underscored by intensive interpretive work and commitment, close attention, emotional involvement and affective alliance with other fans (Jenkins 1992; Duffett 2013). While the characteristics of such practices may sound fetishistic, Jenkins argues that they are critical for providing information and material in the participation of a fandom community. However, *Gangnam Style*'s popularity is contributed to by consumption practices that are different from fandom activities. To understand the numerous likes, shares and parodies received by *Gangnam Style* at a global level, and the song's come-and-go hype, we should draw upon the concepts of memicity and virality. Shifman (2012) distinguishes memetic transmission from viral transmission as the former involves the change of signs while in the latter case, the sign remains unchanged. This distinction is challenged by Varis and Blommaert (2015), who suggest that even the simplest repetition and imitation of a sign involves the recontextualization of the sign. Therefore, memicity and virality are user participation with different levels of productivity and agency. Varis and Blommaert draw upon Malinovski's concept of phatic communion to characterize the ritualistic and convivial aspect of internet memes and activities such as liking or sharing. Memes mutate with different levels of textual productivity to the extent that their original meanings are not as important as their relational functions of expressing a sense of groupness. In the same vein, what people share and like is related to their desire of keeping up with trends in their networks.

Drawing on Varis and Blommaert's argument, we may consider *Gangnam Style* parodies as an example of memetic consumption of celebrity content, while sharing and liking the video contribute to its viral transmission. I agree with Varis and Blommaert's argument that when social media users share and like *Gangnam Style*, the understanding of the actual content and textual properties of the video may not be as important as the assertion of a sense of in-groupness and maintenance of conviviality in the network. However, parodying the music video requires a higher level of textual productivity and agency, where the textuality of the original music video is not irrelevant. Its polycentric and heterogeneous nature, to a certain extent, invites the audience to deconstruct and then re-construct the media text in local communicative contexts. In order to understand the polycentric and heterogeneous nature of this music video, we firstly need some analytic tools from sociolinguistics which help us theorize the phenomenon of globalized culture and language contact.

7.2.2 Indexicality and polycentricity

Indexicality, according to Blommaert (2010), is a mechanism of semiosis, which links momentary instances of communication to socially and culturally ordered norms, genres, traditions and expectations. Through this, indexicality works to reveal connotative

meanings. This means that apart from the linguistic meanings expressed, the register or style of communication also conveys associations with certain activities or social relations. An anecdotal example of this given by Blommaert (2010) is the high-end Japanese chocolate shop with the French name 'Nina's Derrière'. The denotative meaning of *derrière* is 'bottom', which, in its literal meaning, can be considered an awkward element in the name of a chocolate shop. However, as long as the customers recognize the name of the shop to be French without knowing the actual meaning of the word *derrière*, the promotional end can be achieved. This is the result of the indexical meanings attributed to the French language – called upon by the characteristic French spellings, that is, the double 'r' and diacritics – that in this case point to the Japanese social expectation that delicacies from France are upmarket and sophisticated. As we see from this example, indexicality is useful as an analytical tool in exploring the kinds of context-dependent meanings people attach to semiotic materials.

Socially and culturally ordered norms, genres, traditions and expectations form the evaluative authorities in communication. However, communication often orients towards more than one normative center or authority. In communication, two interlocutors can follow different norms, as for instance in Blommaert's (2001) account of an asylum seeker from Africa, whose seemingly chaotic and paradoxical narrative of his experiences, provided for an asylum application, did not accord with the interviewers' expectations of a linear and coherent story. This led to misunderstanding, and a rejected asylum application, as the interviewers judged the narrative to be incoherent and implausible, while, examined through a different lens, the story was structured and coherent. One interlocutor can also follow several norms, or follow one and violate another at the same time. An example of this is provided by Varis and Wang (2011) who discuss the Beijing-based rapper MC Liangliang who published his songs on the internet. This rapper attempted to insert himself into global hip-hop culture by choosing a typical hip-hop name, blending English into his songs and by taking a critical stance in his lyrics so as to claim allegiance with the global hip-hop genre. However, by writing songs mainly in Chinese, and using his music to criticize local societal issues in China, he could be seen as orienting towards local audiences. His performance is thus polycentric, as it orients towards several different centers of normativity. In the analysis below, both indexicality and polycentricity will appear as useful concepts in discussing the potential multiple interpretations of *Gangnam Style*.

7.2.3 Minimal semiotic features as metonymic

Today, social stratification is strongly correlated with lifestyle. As Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) suggested, the consumption of commodities operates symbolically as an indicator for a certain lifestyle – and consequently a certain social position. Individuals differentiate themselves and construct their identity and individuality through these semiotic practices. However, two issues need our attention here. Firstly, commodities are produced on a mass scale and in a homogenized way to maximize profit. Secondly,

producers are expanding their market globally. Consequently, and paradoxically, people consume identical products but also seek to differentiate their lifestyles – and themselves – through this process of consumption. This phenomenon is discussed by Blommaert and Varis (2011) by arguing that personality is indexed by minimal semiotic features in a metonymic way. In the field of marketing, this practice of ‘market differentiation’ is not new: products are differentiated by trivial features, which are promoted as important indexes of specific ways of life. For instance, the famous beer brand Carlsberg launched a campaign a few years ago in which the beer bottle instead of the beer itself was promoted: one of many situations in which the semiotic connotations of the product, rather than the consumption of the product itself, form an important aspect of its appeal to the consumer. As we will see below, metonymic semiotic meaning-attribution enables global audiences to interpret and make sense of *Gangnam Style* by grasping only small bits of the whole ensemble of semiotic resources.

7.2.4 Supervernacular and globalization

Supervernaculars are sociolinguistic codes employed by communities which transcend the traditional speech community in terms of territorial fixedness, physical proximity, shared traditions and values (Blommaert 2010, 2012). Often, a supervernacular derives from an imagined standard code which dominates the global circulation of a specific genre, for instance global languages such as English and French, or music genres such as hip-hop and reggae. In the process of global transmission, it always adopts local mutations, which can be called accents of the supervernacular. Globalization, accordingly, is regarded by Blommaert (2012) as an abstract process containing the interplay of ‘en-globalization’ and ‘de-globalization’. Supervernaculars can be seen as templates which, to be successful on a global scale, include en-globalizing resources, such as broadly recognizable features. For instance, the globally transmitted cultural trope of hipster can be recognized by semiotic resources such as tight jeans, vintage glasses and beards (Maly and Varis 2015). But any reception of this semiotic template on a local scale will rely on de-globalizing semiotic resources which are conditioned by the local economic, political and cultural situations. Any realization of a supervernacular will consequently be in an accented form, and is hence an instance of polycentricity. A certain amount of semiotic resources that index the imagined standard must be retained so as to achieve a metonymically authentic instance of that code. At the same time, the local sociolinguistic economy always constrains access to the en-globalizing semiotic resources and imposes local discourses, dictating the use of a certain language and requiring the application of specific knowledge (Blommaert 2012).

7.2.5 The pragmatic range of modern parody

The above-mentioned concepts: indexicality, polycentricity, metonymic semiotic features, supervernacular and en-/de-globalization, are the main tools I will use for the

analysis of the textual production of *Gangnam Style*. They help me to illustrate the heterogeneous construction of *Gangnam Style*, which is the reason why it invites exuberant appropriative practices. In this section, I discuss audience appropriation from the perspective of its literary mechanism, namely parody. The purpose here is to draw attention on the pragmatic range of this type of participation, which is wider than fandom activities.

The definition of parody is notoriously disputed, and forms part of a taxonomic muddle together with similar cultural practices such as pastiche and satire. However, the examples discussed in this chapter – and many similar YouTube videos – mostly align with Linda Hutcheon's (1978, 2000) account of parody. Hutcheon (1978) rejects a trans-historical definition of parody, working mainly with parody as expressed in twentieth-century art forms including literature, architecture, painting and music. She argues that the modern use of parody did not aim at ridicule or destruction. Rather, effective parody employs a combination of distance and juxtaposition between the original and the new text, producing an effect that is playful rather than ridiculing; critical, rather than destructive. Parody hence is a bilingual synthesis, combining two 'voices' or perspectives. It is thus more complicated than pastiche, where the original text is imitated and adapted for the aim of celebration, and thus only one voice is heard. Apart from this distinction, according to Hutcheon (2000) the most serious misunderstanding of parody is to confuse it with satire. The aims of these two cultural practices are distinct in the sense that parody is primarily an artistic phenomenon, while satire adopts a political stance directed at events or situations outside the text, attacking dominant voices or forces, but with no specifically artistic aim. Satire can be the result of different techniques, artistic means such as parody being one of them. This is the case with Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei's parody of *Gangnam Style*. This parody also demonstrates that although 20th-century parody does not sacrifice the original text, the ironic and critical distance taken does invite judgment and reflection on the ultra-text environment.

7.3 Data collection

In this case study, I have conducted multi-modal discourse analysis (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001) on the semiotic construction of the *Gangnam Style* music video and two of its parodies. The two parodies were selected based on convenience sampling method. *Gangnam Style*'s global success in the second half of 2012 coincides with the *Sinterklaas* festivity in the Netherlands from early November. The Dutch *Gangnam Style* parody *Zwarte Pieten Stijl* therefore became one of the most visible parodies in the Netherlands with exuberant local features, as it was widely shared and viewed on social media platforms during the festivity period. In contrast, *Grass Mud Horse Style* is a politically sensitive parody, which was censored in Chinese social media immediately after its release. Nevertheless, on YouTube it still generated numerous views.

These two examples also demonstrate the wide pragmatic range of parodying commercially manufactured celebrity content. In the analysis, I regarded both the text and audio-visual representation as semiotic resources. Specifically, I took the lyrics, dance, characters, objects and physical settings as the object of analysis. Both the original video and two parodies were downloaded, and screenshots were taken at scenes with rich indexical meanings for the analysis.

7.4 A semiotic analysis of Gangnam Style

The success of *Gangnam Style* started discussions about the global spread of Korean popular music (referred to as K-pop). The celebrity industry is never short of talent myths, in which we attempt to use aspects of individuals' personality or background as the justification for their celebrity status. This is why Psy's star qualities and personality are frequently accredited as reasons for his ascent to stardom. A common understanding of music as an international language expressing universal meanings could also be perceived to encourage interpretations that emphasize mythical qualities of the *Gangnam Style* phenomenon. Alternatively, we might also seek to explain the phenomenon by *Gangnam Style*'s repetitive melody and lyrics, which were considered 'catchy', and hence would linger in listeners' heads. These accounts make sense from an industry or journalistic perspective, but from a cultural studies angle, the content of the song and the contexts in which it has been received need to be scrutinized to explore to what extent these explanations are valid. In the following section, I seek to do this by analyzing the *Gangnam Style* music video as a multimodal semiotic construct.

7.4.1 The lyrics

The lyrics of *Gangnam Style* were written orienting to multiple evaluative authorities: normativity in the global mainstream music industry, and local discussions in Korean society. K-pop is a highly mature industry which can be defined as a 'star factory'. Fierce competition within the South Korean market also drives business expansion into other Asian countries such as Japan and China. However, compared to American popular music, K-pop still resides on the periphery of the world music industry. International music charts are dominated by songs in English. The dominance of English music also exerts a generic influence on popular music in more peripheral areas. This influence is visible in the English phrases sometimes embedded in the lyrics of non-English songs like *Gangnam Style*. *Gangnam Style* contains two recurrent phrases in English: 'Gangnam style' and 'sexy lady'. The discourses indexed by these two phrases are not difficult to interpret. Firstly, contemporary individuality is increasingly derived from lifestyle, which to a certain degree is the consequence of consumerism. We can situate

the affluent Gangnam district within this consumerist construct of identity.⁹⁰ Accordingly, what one wears, drives and eats become prominent symbols which an individual might employ to appropriate the Gangnam identity; consequently, they create the concept of 'Gangnam style'. The other recurrent phrase 'sexy lady' reflects the prevalence of sexualized discourse in popular culture. The following is the lyrics of *Gangnam Style* translated into English.⁹¹

*Oppa is Gangnam style
Gangnam style
A girl who is warm and humane during the day
A classy girl who knows how to enjoy the freedom of a cup of coffee
A girl whose heart gets hotter when night comes
A girl with that kind of twist
I'm a guy
A guy who is as warm as you during the day
A guy who one-shots his coffee before it even cools down
A guy whose heart bursts when night comes
That kind of guy
Beautiful, loveable
Yes you, hey, yes you, hey
Beautiful, loveable
Yes you, hey, yes you, hey
Now let's go until the end
Oppa is Gangnam style, Gangnam style
Oppa is Gangnam style, Gangnam style
Oppa is Gangnam style
Eh- Sexy Lady, Oppa is Gangnam style
Eh- Sexy Lady oh oh oh oh
A girl who looks quiet but plays when she plays
A girl who puts her hair down when the right time comes
A girl who covers herself but is sexier than a girl who bares it all
A sensible girl like that
I'm a guy
A guy who seems calm but plays when he plays
A guy who goes completely crazy when the right time comes
A guy who has bulging ideas rather than muscles*

⁹⁰ Gangnam is the name of a district in Seoul, the capital city of South Korea. Located on the south bank of Han River, the district is famous for its heavily concentrated wealth and high standard of living. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gangnam_District viewed on 18th July 2017.

⁹¹ Source: <http://www.kpoplyrics.net/psy-gangnam-style-lyrics-english-romanized.html#ixzz4xTtBT0iM>, data retrieved on 8th April 2013.

That kind of guy
Beautiful, loveable
Yes you, hey, yes you, hey
Beautiful, loveable
Yes you, hey, yes you, hey
Now let's go until the end
Oppa is Gangnam style, Gangnam style
Oppa is Gangnam style, Gangnam style
Oppa is Gangnam style
Eh- Sexy Lady, Oppa is Gangnam style
Eh- Sexy Lady oh oh oh oh
On top of the running man is the flying man, baby baby
I'm a man who knows a thing or two
On top of the running man is the flying man, baby baby
I'm a man who knows a thing or two
You know what I'm saying
Oppa is Gangnam style
Eh- Sexy Lady, Oppa is Gangnam style
Eh- Sexy Lady oh oh oh oh

The two English phrases – ‘Gangnam Style’ and ‘sexy lady’ – are accessible to both Korean and Western audiences. Embedded English words in K-pop music are common, as they index a sense of global fashionableness. The vast majority of internationally popular K-pop songs have an official English title. More often than not, this title is a phrase repeated in the song between the Korean lines. There are several examples of this, such as *I Got a Boy* by Girls Generation, *Sorry Sorry* by Super Junior, and of course *Gangnam Style* and Psy’s more recent release *Gentleman*. However, a song completely in English is unlikely to be popular in the Korean market, as many audience members do not have the language proficiency to understand its content, let alone sing the song themselves in Karaoke (an important aspect of the Korean popular music market). Moreover, Psy himself has explained that he actually tried to compose the entire song in English, but certain local cultural concepts appeared to be non-translatable.⁹² Therefore, it can be argued that small phrases of English are inserted into K-pop songs such as ‘Gangnam Style’ to en-globalize the song; that is, to include elements metonymically authenticating the song as belonging to the modern, global genre of popular music.

For Western audiences, the phrases ‘Gangnam style’, as an indicator of a certain lifestyle, and ‘sexy lady’, become important clues for making sense of the song. We can suggest that they work well because an affluent life and the company of a sexy

⁹² <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2012/nov/18/gangnam-style-psy>, viewed on 24 October 2017.

lady resonate with the social desires relentlessly marketed to Western audiences. Except for the English phrases repeated in the song, the lyrics are in Korean. In general, the lyrics can be summarized as a detailed description of a prototypical Gangnam lifestyle. By merely reading a translation of the Korean lyrics, audiences without any contextual knowledge might interpret the song as promoting a flamboyant and expensive way of life, while the song in fact is a satire of those leading such a lifestyle.

7.4.2 Visual representation

Visually, *Gangnam Style* is a heterogeneous construct in two ways. Firstly, it draws upon several modes of expression: dance, characters, objects and physical settings. Meanings are thus transmitted through a range of different semiotic means, such as the famous horse dance (Figure 7.1), Psy's appearance, and the choice of the subway as a location.⁹³ Secondly, a deliberately polycentric semiotic repertoire is mobilized to index multiple communicative contexts. In this section, I will explore the semiotic resources afforded by dance, characters, objects and physical settings. While these are distinct modes in their own right, reception and interpretations of the video rely on the interrelations of all these modes. Therefore, the analysis will also move back and forth between the different modes. For instance, while the lyrics aim at satirizing a specific kind of social climber, the visual representation juxtaposes idealized economic affluence with material reality, drawing attention to the disparity between the two. This juxtaposition is where the criticism of materiality and consumerism prevalent in South Korean society becomes apparent.

The horse dance has become one of the best-recognized symbols of *Gangnam Style* and is one of the key reasons for the video's popularity among audiences. Compared to many American pop stars, or other K-pop artists, Psy's dancing skills can only be regarded as mediocre. However, discarding what are normally considered to be 'sexy' or 'cool' moves, *Gangnam Style*'s horse dance explores the human body's physical interaction with animals and the natural environment. Dance, especially folk dance in Asia, has a long history of imitating the movements of animals or of riding. For instance, horse dances recur as popular dance forms in Mongolian culture which has the traditions of horse riding. The movements usually feature waving hand, raising whip and agile bounces (Li 2006: 23) In *Gangnam Style*, the unconventional dance moves might be construed as comical, but they are also meaningful and culturally referential. Audiences without a sophisticated knowledge of dance can still recognize that Psy is riding an invisible horse (Figure 7.1). The lack of complexity also bridges the distance between dancer and viewer: everybody can bounce like a horse-rider in tune with the music (Figure 7.2). While critics unfamiliar with the cultural context might criticize this as ungraceful and crude, Psy's horse dance can be seen as revitalizing aspects of local folk culture, which is deeply embedded in the nature of human society, and bringing

⁹³ Source for Figures 7.1-7.4: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9bZkp7q19f0>, data retrieved on 8 April 2013.

it into an era of participatory culture and grassroots creativity. The thousands of *Gangnam Style* parodies on YouTube justify this interpretation.



Figure 7.1 Psy is riding an invisible horse



Figure 7.2 Group horse dance

In terms of characters, the Gangnam man in the music video does not have the conventional tall, lean and cool appearance of men in other K-pop videos. He is a 'wannabe' Gangnam man, who lacks symbolic capital in both appearance and behavior, but invests excessive effort in his clothing and hairstyle. While symbolic capital is overtly expressed by the physical attributes of characters in the video, what makes this alleged Gangnam man so inauthentic is his inability to afford the lifestyle he desires. His beach vacation is spent on a children's sandy playground. He walks towards the camera accompanied by two sexy ladies emulating celebrities on the red carpet, but is pelted by pieces of newspaper, trash, and snow (Figure 7.3). He finally meets his dream girl, the 'sexy lady' from the lyrics, but the meeting occurs in a subway, suggesting the girl also belongs to the working class (Figure 7.4).



Figure 7.3 Red carpet walk



Figure 7.4 Dream girl in subway

The visual representation can be summarized as the juxtaposition of a lavish, upper-class lifestyle with a series of images of working-class reality. It operates as a caricature of a daydream, mocking those who endorse materialism. This daydream, however, is only understandable for those familiar with the Korean social context. For Western audiences, on the other hand, the semiotic resources in the visual representation are recontextualized. In several scenes, Psy is surrounded by sexy, scantily-clad women, before meeting his dream girl. Judging from his leisure activities, he is rich. Activities such as beach sports, horse-riding, relaxing in a sauna and bathing in hot springs do not fulfil basic needs, but rather suggest the subject has money and time to invest. For global audiences, these features of the video work to construct an image of an extravagant lifestyle, serving as the metonymy for interpretation. Patterns of conspicuous consumption characterize this interpretation of the lifestyle depicted. At first sight, the characters, objects and places in the video can be reminiscent of many Western popular music videos such as, David Guetta's *Sexy Chick*, where lavish pool party scenes

are accompanied by electronic music.⁹⁴ A comparative reading of the two illustrates that the mainstream music industry generates a trans-local discourse obsessed with notions of success apparent also in the peripheral Korean pop music industry. For males, it is desirable to be affluent, self-confident and assertive; for females, physical beauty is the goal to pursue. *Gangnam Style* thus becomes a new, humorous take on a frequently-circulated story.

To summarize, the *Gangnam Style* music video is a heterogeneous construct, which albeit being a K-pop music video contains multiple semiotic resources orienting towards the dominant Western popular music industry. For the Korean audience, the song is an ironic representation of the wannabe and social climbers in the Gangnam district, who mindlessly endorse consumerism. This twist of irony may not be received by global audiences who do not know about the local discussions in Korean society. But this does not interfere with their recontextualized interpretation of the video through a familiar Western discourse. I suggest that the polycentric textuality of the music video, and its meta-discourse of lifestyle invite audiences' derivative appropriation.

7.5 *Gangnam Style* parodies

Gangnam Style has generated diverse audience appropriation. For instance, there are parodies ridiculing the – for non-Korean-speaking audiences nonsensical – Korean lyrics, or Psy's flamboyant performance. There are also parodies that riff on the kind of lifestyle and identity portrayed in the song. Before the success of *Gangnam Style*, Psy was not widely known beyond the South Korean popular music scene. Consequently, such widespread participation cannot be explained merely as a product of existing fandom. In effect, *Gangnam Style* is an internet meme, in the sense that the transmission of this video encouraged increasingly intensive audience participation by means of innovative and derivative practices. Indeed, parodic participation is a widespread and popular way of consuming celebrity products. Following *Gangnam Style*, the hit of 2013 was *The Fox* with more than four hundred million views and 684,000 result entries when searching with the key word 'The Fox parody'.⁹⁵ In addition to singers who rise to fame as a result of these kinds of viral phenomena, music videos by established artists such as *Wrecking Ball* by Miley Cyrus and *Royal* by Lorde also have attracted active and derivative consumption by their audiences. These parodists are oriented toward the original cultural product in a number of ways, and include loyal fans, ordinary spectators and professional and semi-professional musicians.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N9hazmsUxRM>, viewed on 13 April 2015.

⁹⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jofNR_WkoCE, viewed on 13 April 2015.

⁹⁶ Examples include Taylor Swift's fan parody of *Shake It Off*, viewed 13 April 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pNWO7KFCX8> and Bart Baker's amateur-professional parody of *Royal*, which contains sharp criticisms of the original song, viewed 14 April 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=llo1HtAw_40&list=RDllo1HtAw_40.

In addition to the wide scope of parodic participation, audiences also realize multiple communicative functions through their videos. They make use of *Gangnam Style* as a supervernacular resource (Blommaert 2010; Blommaert and Rampton 2011), shared and deployed by de-territorialized communities (Maly and Varis 2015). As a result, the consumption of celebrity products acquires a functional purpose, which I argue is distinctive from that of fandom practices such as fanfiction writing or cosplay. Fans may invest intense interpretive labor and emotional engagement with celebrity content, which are critical materials in creating affective associations within fan communities. In contrast, a parody maintains a semantic and affective distance to the original music video. In line with Varis and Blommaert's (2015) characterization of internet memes, the denotational meaning of the original sign does not necessarily dictate how it will be appropriated in new communicative contexts. Connecting with Hutcheon's (1978, 2000) discussion of contemporary art forms, modern parody does not seem to aim at ridicule or destruction: the ironic effect is signaled by a distance and juxtaposition between the background text and a new one, which is 'more playful than ridiculing, more critical than destructive' (1978: 202). This means that parodists are not necessarily enthusiastic about Psy and his music, neither do they need to understand the song in detail. Rather their emphasis is on the pragmatic momentum in a local communicative context. In line with Rymes' (2012) observation on YouTube, widely circulating cultural emblems are incorporated into one's communicative repertoire at local level. Similarly, Leppänen et al. (2014) find that semiotic resources on social media are recontextualized for specific cultural ends such as identity performance. In the following section, I shall illustrate this new form of consuming celebrity content through parodic participation with two examples: the celebrative festive song *Zwarte Pieten Stijl* and the political protest of *Grass Mud Horse Style*.

7.5.1 *Sinterklaas and Zwarte Pieten Stijl*

The Dutch parody *Zwarte Pieten Stijl* (henceforth *ZPS*) is produced by Party Piet Pablo, a group of event actors who provide entertainment as part of the annual *Sinterklaas* celebrations marking the arrival of Saint Nicolas (*Sinterklaas*) in the Netherlands on the fifth of December. The video was uploaded to YouTube on the ninth of November 2012, when the global hype around the horse dance coincided with the local Dutch *Sinterklaas* festivities. Accompanied by his aide 'Black Pete' (*Zwarte Piet*), Saint Nicolas brings gifts to well-behaved children and sends naughty children back to Madrid in Spain (where he allegedly comes from). During the festivities, numerous *Zwarte Pieten* distribute candies and gifts, and sing, dance and play with children.

In terms of textual construction, *ZPS* incorporates and recontextualizes a widely circulated mass-produced Korean pop song into the local communicative repertoire. While this process of decontextualization and recontextualization is the most common mechanism for generative practices on YouTube and other internet memes, for parodic videos we should especially stress the historical traces a piece of text bears when it appears in the new linguistic, cultural and social context. In Hutcheon's formulation,

the playfulness of parody is based on two textual conventions interacting with each other. Turning back to *ZPS*, it is evidently not a mere imitation of *Gangnam Style*, as a significant distance is kept between the voice of the Dutch tradition and the voice of the Korean popular song.



Figure 7.5 *Zwarte Piet* in a horse shelter



Figure 7.6 *Zwarte Pieten* group dance surrounded by gift boxes

It is not difficult to identify the semiotic resources indexing *Gangnam Style*. Firstly, the melody is kept unchanged. Secondly, several original scenes are imitated. At the very beginning, the protagonist Piet nods his head to the rhythm of the music just like Psy does in the original video on the playground. Piet is then seen walking in a horse stable (Figure 7.5).⁹⁷ The most recognizable element imitated is the solo and group dance (Figure 7.6). In addition to the detailed imitation, the video is also a fully-fledged localization of *Gangnam Style*. Prominently, the video's title is in Dutch. While the word 'style' is the 'en-globalizing' resource used by Psy to target global audiences, *ZPS* 'de-

⁹⁷ Source for Figures 7.5 and 7.6 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QqFdsj_i6f4 data retrieved on 20 March 2014.

globalizes' it with the Dutch equivalent '*Stijl*'. Moreover, the Korean lyrics and the life-style claims of a wannabe metropolitan figure in the original video are replaced by a description of the mission of *Zwarte Pieten* in Dutch, which is to bring gifts to the well-behaved children in the Netherlands (Figure 7.6). As for the characters' appearance, Psy's glamorous and flamboyant suits are replaced by renaissance page costumes characteristic of *Zwarte Pieten*. The accessories have also changed from black sunglasses to headphones. On Party Piet Pablo's website, it is mentioned that Piet Pablo listens to cool music on his headphones and sings all day long about how great Saint Nikolas is.⁹⁸ While skyscrapers and sports cars accentuate the desired metropolitan atmosphere in *Gangnam Style*, boxes of gifts and children's bedrooms in *ZPS* illustrate Zwarte Piet's mission.

Thus, *ZPS* is a memetic uptake of *Gangnam Style* and typical of a modern parody par excellence. It is the distance between a Korean popular song and a Dutch traditional festivity that contributes a sense of playfulness in the parody. We see a juxtaposition between traditional folklore and a viral internet song, between Western heritage and Asian popular art, and last but not least, between naïve childhood experiences and hypocritical adult behaviors. This Dutch parody sheds some light on the spatial mobility of entertainment products and the global and local semiotic dynamics involved. In the following section, I take *Grass Mud Horse Style* (henceforth *GMHS*) by Ai Weiwei as another example. This analysis will reveal that parody can also mobilize and incorporate popular cultural resources into wider social discourses, specifically political deliberation in this case.

7.5.2 Political protest and Grass Mud Horse Style

Ai Weiwei is a contemporary Chinese dissident artist whose works cover the fields of sculpture, installation, architecture, photography and film. He has also been active in social criticism both through his artistic projects and his blog posts on Sina Weibo. On April 3, 2010, he was arrested in Beijing under the charge of economic crimes. The *GMHS* video was uploaded to YouTube on October 24, 2010. Grass mud horse, pronounced as *cǎonǐmǎ* in Mandarin Chinese, is a near homophone of 'fuck your mother', pronounced as *càonǐmā*. The motivation for the use of the fictional creature grass mud horse was to replace the profanity so as to evade censorship online. The broader context for understanding the phenomenon of the grass mud horse is that, while the dominant powers in China strive to promote harmonious public deliberation on the internet, users are unimpressed with the fact that not only profane phrases but also politically-sensitive words are censored online (Wang, Juffermans and Du 2016). Consequently, 'grass mud horse' and its profane meaning have developed to symbolize a campaign for freedom of speech on the Chinese internet. Because the title of the video has this connotation, we can assume that with his video Ai Weiwei is protesting governmental censorship of dissident messages as well as his 2010 arrest.

⁹⁸ The website of Party Piet Pablo, <http://www.partypietpablo.nl/>, viewed 20 March 2014.

In terms of textuality, *GMHS* can be considered as less of a detailed imitation of *Gangnam Style* than *ZPS*. While it primarily mimics Psy and other actors' dance moves, less attention is given to reproducing the plot and physical surroundings. Several original scenes such as the horse stable, yoga practice and an underground parking lot are directly mixed into the parody; hence the video can also be considered a remix. One reason for this might be that Ai Weiwei was under home arrest in his house in Beijing at the time of the making of the video, so it was simply not feasible for him to reconstruct everything from the original video. We can also observe that both the lyrics and melody remain intact. However, the video's objective of political protest is still very palpable, and is rendered such through the use of salient imagery.

The video starts off with a scene from *Gangnam Style* with a woman waving a fan, and an airplane with a banner hanging from it flying across the sky. Then the camera zooms out, and Ai Weiwei's face appears. He is wearing a pair of black sunglasses and moving to the rhythm of the music. The scene quickly moves to Ai's solo dance in front of a wall covered by Boston ivy. Later, accompanied by two women, he dances out of a white door, imitating Psy's dance at the gate of a parking lot, drizzled with paper petals (Figure 7.7).⁹⁹ This is again followed by Ai's solo dance, but suddenly he takes off the sunglasses, and takes a pair of handcuffs from his pocket (Figure 7.8). Galloping, he begins to wave them like a whip. After a few insertions of original scenes from *Gangnam Style*, a group of people join him to dance. Later the stage is given to Ai and one of his associates, rock and roll singer Zuoxiao Zuzhou. The two dancers wear matching outfits: Ai is wearing a black suit with a bright or nearly fluorescent pink T-shirt. Zuoxiao is wearing a black jacket with pink trousers. The two figures then begin to dance while handcuffed together. After a few more alternations between scenes from the original video and the group dance, the video closes with the face of a galloping Ai Weiwei.



Figure 7.7 Ai Weiwei's horse dance

⁹⁹ Source for Figures 7.7 and 7.8: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4LAefTzSwWY>, data retrieved on 20 March 2014.



Figure 7.8 Ai Weiwei's horse dance with handcuffs

In *GMHS*, two voices and two textual conventions coalesce, signified by different semiotic resources. Firstly, the video's title and soundtrack and the actors' dance moves explicitly index the Korean pop song. By contrast, Ai's activist identity, the profanity in the title, the handcuffs, and the sole physical surrounding of Ai's house express his anger at being censored and arrested. Unlike the *Zwarte Pieten*, whose dance and songs are an important component in celebrating *Sinterklaas'* arrival, Ai Weiwei's team do not aim to emphasize that the artist can also dance. Apart from the reduced imitation of scenes and plots, Ai's imitation is clumsy, often off-beat. I regard this however as typical of Ai's style. In his other music videos (e.g. the song of *Grass Mud Horse* and the most recent *Dumbass*), his performances are always intentionally careless, awkward, off-key and deploy popular cultural resources and profane language.

As Bruner (2005) points out, humorless state practices tend to be continuously checked by carnivalesque protest. While *GMHS* cannot be defined simply as political carnival, its humor, degradation and creative disrespect function similarly to this form of protest. As a result, Ai Weiwei's style of articulation specifically targets the rigid and serious internet censorship and the government's inability to manage dissensus and ambiguity. The humor is generated both by the insertion of scenes from the original video and the intertextuality between the political indifference of the original and the political activism of the parody. *GMHS* is therefore a parody, and also a satire according to Hutcheon, as its evaluative judgment is directed towards an ultra-text issue.

Through parodies, the consumption of celebrity content acquires a functional perspective. While popular culture can provide space for commentary on political narratives, this chapter also emphasizes the social and institutional underpinnings of the semiotic flows between entertainment and political spheres. Parodic appropriation of popular entertainment products can be effectively employed for political deliberation, as sometimes direct protest may be submerged in an atmosphere of political indifference. Explicit protest may also be censored and quickly stopped by the powers being protested. Most importantly, not every citizen has recourse to either the discursive traditions or the venues for articulating their views accessible to artists and intellectu-

als. In January 2013, a group of migrant workers in Wuhan, the capital of Hubei province in China, also imitated Psy's horse dance in front of the building they had constructed to protest against delays in the payment of their salaries.¹⁰⁰ As the protesters stated, instead of kneeling down and crying, or creating a drama by jumping off a building, the horse dance enabled them to maintain their dignity while attracting attention. From this perspective, parodic consumption of celebrity products can give a voice to people who need to be heard.

7.6 The social function of consuming *Gangnam Style*

The empirical studies of fandom activities have shown us that the social function of modern celebrity can only be understood by examining how celebrity content is appropriated and incorporated into the everyday life of audiences (Jenkins 1992; Jenson 1992; Hills 2015). The intimacy, proximity and authentic experiences gained from celebrity watching are neither fetishistic nor delusional. Instead, they have opened a public space for the deliberation of social normativities and personal sense of individuality (Caughey 1978; Picirillo 1986; Leets et al. 1995; Wood and Skeggs 2004; Hills 2015). On social media, however, the global success of *Gangnam Style* and its parodies suggest that the audience has adopted quite different ways of engaging with celebrity content. Firstly, parodists maintain a distance towards the original music video. Here, my argument should not be mistaken to be that social media users adopt elitist aesthetic practices of critical reading, in the sense that they are cautious about being devoured by the ideological construction of the text.¹⁰¹ By distance, I refer to the fact that audiences are not necessarily devotees of interpretive practice. A few semiotic clues can function as metonymic signs for them in understanding *Gangnam Style* in their own ways. Moreover, neither celebrative nor critical attitudes are the prerequisite of parodic appropriation. Affective commitment therefore is not invested in the commercially manufactured media content, but in the re-contextualized communicative practice, the ultra-textual issues that they would like to address in the parodies.

Having explored how audiences actively consume social media celebrity content, I then analyze what form of social interaction and social collectives can be established through these practices. From an industrial perspective, a classical means to construct celebrity image is to measure against the average audience image according to demographic parameters such as gender, age and class, so that audience identification can be established. Modern celebrity's cultural underpinning resides in the fact that stars

¹⁰⁰ See: http://news.ifeng.com/shendu/nfzm/detail_2013_02/07/22044270_1.shtml, 《民工讨薪进化论, 从“跳楼秀”到“江南 Style”》, (The evolution of chasing the unpaid salary by migrant workers: From 'jumping off building drama' to *Gangnam Style*), viewed 10 April 2015, and <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jan/23/chinese-workers-gangnam-style-protest>, 'Chinese workers dance *Gangnam Style* to protest over unpaid wages', viewed 10 April 2015.

¹⁰¹ See the discussion on the relationship between cultural hierarchy, literacy practice and stereotyped fandom in Jenkins (1992).

signify the dominant social roles and represent the prized ways of life in society. This process implies celebrity's function to configure the society into recognizable and stable categories, the thick groups in Blommaert's (2018) sense.

However, the ways in which *Gangnam Style* is consumed suggest that audiences can also actively configure social groups aided by the technological infrastructure of social media. These forms of social cohesion are characterized by their lightness (Varis and Blommert 2015; Blommaert 2018). People sharing and parodying *Gangnam Style* form ephemeral groups who would like to stay informed, trendy and more importantly being heard in the digital world. Social media is cultivating a new mode of observation among audiences, who are not plunged into ecstasy by a larger-than-life face on the silver screen, but are trained to keep up with and further feed the algorithm-reliant trendiness on the internet. *ZPS* may elicit responses from the local *Sinterklaas* festivity enthusiasts, both young and old. Filming a parody of the most popular song of the moment also gives the parodists a chance to stand out among other festive songs. Ai Weiwei draws the attention of politically aware Chinese audiences, probably mostly Chinese overseas diaspora, since *GMHS* is censored in the online space of mainland China. Together, these groups are part of a globalized *Gangnam Style* audience, who have different drives, attitudes and varied levels of agency and productivity when consuming the music video. This audience group is not something that industrial content creators can imagine while producing the song and Psy's celebrity image. Thus, the condition to *Gangnam Style*'s fame is not a predetermined and fixed cultural signification, like Garbo's androgynous face and Monroe's innocent sexuality. Fame has become an effect of social media users' demand to maintain conviviality among their social networks that is to demonstrate a sense of in-groupness by capitalizing on trendy cultural resources. The music video's polycentric textuality which invites audiences' de-construction and re-construction caters to the semiotic demand in this process.

7.7 Summary

In this chapter I have further explored how social media is cultivating a new way of seeing among users, here by appropriating semiotic resources like *Gangnam Style* to elicit audiences and configure communicative contexts in digital environments. This attention arrangement has contributed to a new condition to fame in the digital age. I have also shown that the music video is a heterogeneous construct, which resonates differently with audiences from different areas through its polycentricity. The lyrics, dance moves, storyline and physical setting of the music video orient towards multiple evaluative authorities, referencing both the mainstream popular music industry, and local discussions within South Korean society. Such textuality of the music video caters to users' semiotic needs on social media.

The popularity of *Gangnam Style* on the global scale demonstrates a rupture from the fame of modern celebrity culture, which relies on relatively fixed cultural signification and centralized production and dissemination. Through recontextualization, *Gangnam Style* can mean almost everything in localized communicative environments. In the parodies discussed, a group of *Zwarte Pieten* imitate the horse dance to mark the Dutch *Sinterklaas* festivities, while dissident artist Ai WeiWei flaunts handcuffs to campaign for freedom of speech. To a certain extent, the video does not need to mean much for those who simply clicked the thumbs-up button or shared it, as long as such phatic communication can help them stay up to date about trends and in group with their friends online. In this sense, fame on the internet may not entail a priori substantive meanings, and become an effect of convivial communicative practices in light social groups. In the next chapter, I shall summarize the findings of the empirical case studies and draw conclusions on the features and tendencies of the metamorphosis of fame on social media.

Conclusions

On 8th of October 2017, a superstar singer-actor in China announced a romantic relationship with his superstar actress girlfriend on Weibo. Within a few hours, the microblog post had received more than 5 million likes and the server of Weibo was down due to the large traffic in a short period of time. The actor's millions of adolescent female fans were heartbroken and even more non-fans were astonished by the virality of this public event. The 8th of October 2017 marked the end of the world, as fans lost their idol and non-fans lost their internet. After Weibo's service was recovered, the Weibo account of a well-known communist current affairs magazine posted in a comforting tone, 'Please remember, no matter what happens, the Communist Party of China is always by your side'. Not surprisingly, this post also went viral on that day. It seems that on today's internet, everyone needs to participate, in one way or another, in the virality of cultural tropes. This is the new condition to fame on social media, a rupture from modern celebrity culture that I have discussed in this book.

I have approached social media celebrity as the latest metamorphosis of fame. A cultural historical perspective on fame suggests that this status is socioculturally situated and shaped by the extent and modes of communication in a society (Braudy 1986). Its modern manifestation – entertainment celebrity – is theorized by scholars as a site for the negotiation of cultural identities (Turner 2014; Dyer 1998), a form of commodity (Gamsom 1994; Turner 2014), and cultural resource for maintaining social cohesion (Hills 2015; Turner 2014; Rojek 2001). In other words, modern celebrity is distinguished from previous forms of public visibility by its cultural preoccupation with personality and appearance, as well as its reliance on an industrial infrastructure for production and dissemination. In this study, digital ethnography is adopted to explore the situated practices of making and consuming celebrity on several social media platforms. By investigating social media celebrity from the perspectives of cultural meanings, industrial infrastructure, political significance and social function, I found that social media celebrity on the one hand maintains continuities with, and on the other hand manifests rupture from the traditional celebrity culture. The circulation of a socially meaningful cultural trope, be it about a personal sense of individuality or a political dissenting opinion, is increasingly reliant on the manipulation of platform popularity metrics and an effect of user appropriation on social media.

In Chapter 4, I have explored the cultural meanings of Chinese social media celebrities, called the internet reds. Celebrity is a cultural institution where the ideological contradictions in a society can be negotiated or challenged (Marshall 1997; Turner

2014). The images of stars on the screen articulate ‘both promise and difficulty the notion individual presents for all of us who live by it’ (Dyer 1998: 6). In this case study, I found that although social media celebrities can enact bottom-up youth online identities in China, internet fame still exerts an ideological function in legitimating dominant cultural identities.

The internet reds articulate gendered experiences of a neoliberal economic order and cultural discourses in contemporary China. Female fashion microbloggers and internet hosts represent the identity of *baifumei*, the fair-skinned, rich and beautiful girls in China. They embrace a globalized post-feminist subjectivity, for whom fashion and consumption practices are considered as a way of self-expression and a sign of economic achievement. These female internet reds are the ‘glamorous high-achievers’ in McRobbie’s (2004) sense, who seem to benefit from the exuberant IT industry and market economy in contemporary China. In contrast, male internet reds are the underprivileged losers, namely *diaosi*. Characterized by mischievousness and humor, the comic video star epitomizes the Chinese precariat class, who experiences insecurity and frustration under the neoliberal economic order that China has adopted since the 1980s. However, the celebrity *Diaosi* reconciles the contradiction within the alliance of the precariat class, by naturalizing the dominance of educated young professionals over migrant workers. Celebrity *baifumei* and *diaosi* together circulate the trope of ‘male injury’ and silence female sufferings in a social environment affecting both genders. From these findings we can conclude that internet fame, like its predecessor on mass media, is culturally situated by negotiating and representing dominant identities in society.

To a certain extent, we can understand fame on social media as the intensification of modern celebrity culture. Ordinary users like the Chinese internet reds and content creators on the global platform of YouTube conduct self-representation and self-celebrification practices like entertainment stars (Senft 2008; Gamson 2011; Marwick and boyd 2011). In Chapter 5, I have discussed how the continuity between internet fame and traditional celebrity’s fame also manifests in the industrial underpinnings of social media celebrity. Taking YouTube beauty vlogging as an example, I found that this career is economically embedded in an industrial structure constituted by the platform’s business model, technical affordances, the advertising market and commercial cultural intermediaries.

In line with Cunningham et al. (2016) and Lobato (2016), social media platforms like YouTube are undergoing the process of institutionalization in the context of media convergence. Multichannel networks professionalize grassroots YouTube stars by providing services that are offered by traditional celebrity agencies, but with the technical features and business models of the IT industry. In respect of managing individual YouTube channels and personal brands, I discovered that the vloggers conduct meticulous entrepreneurial calculations considering the abovementioned factors with the aim of channel growth and high media visibility. This emerging industrial structure also

gives rise to a distinctive cultural logic of social media celebrity. YouTube beauty vloggers' media representation is characterized by staged authenticity, managed connect-edness, abundant celebrity figures and self-sufficient uniqueness. What we can conclude from this case study is that social media celebrity, like its predecessor on mass media, is a manufactured commodity supported by vigorous industrial forces.

Nevertheless, internet fame can be also achieved without the representation of a personal sense of individuality and the reliance on centralized production, diverging from the main features characterizing modern celebrity culture. In Chapter 6, I have discovered that Weibo political microbloggers in China are able to achieve high media visibility and exert influence on public opinion irrespective of their personalities or personal images. Instead, the microbloggers actively navigate through the popularity metrics and algorithms of the platform. One of the strategies is to form an alliance with like-minded microbloggers, academics, journalists, entrepreneurs and some politically expressive entertainment stars, so that an event or a piece of opinion can be co-promoted thus forming an echo chamber effect. This strategy reduces the diversity of perspectives in political discussions and leads to ideological polarization. It explains, to some degree, the highly homogeneous anti-governmental agenda of the political microbloggers in China. The microbloggers also selectively simplify their writings, where historical events and news stories are framed as a trigger to one's dissident stance. Nevertheless, for the case of political microbloggers, I argued that their fame cannot be reduced to merely algorithm-tailored publicity maneuvers. Instead, the public role of a dissenting opinion leader is culturally and socially situated against China's political landscape and media policies.

It is in the virality of *Gangnam Style* that I found internet fame may not entail pre-determined cultural meanings. Different from modern celebrity's signifying power, viral fame is constituted ad hoc by social media users' appropriation of the celebrity images as semiotic resources in contextualizing their communicative practices on social media. *Gangnam Style* is a polycentric construct orienting to the evaluative centers of the global mainstream popular music industry and local social discussions in South Korean society. This polycentricity enables the song to resonate with global as well as local Korean audiences, thus inviting further derivative appropriations. The numerous *Gangnam Style* parodies demonstrate that participatory culture is no longer restricted to fandom practices. In these parodies, the affective commitment is invested in re-contextualized communicative practices, the ultra-textual issues that parodists would like to address, and their consumption practices are marked by different drives, attitudes, and varied levels of agency and productivity. Those who share and parody *Gangnam Style* form ephemeral and lightly connected groups of audiences who would like to stay informed, trendy and sometimes be heard in the digital world.

In these four empirical case studies, my observation departs from spotting the similarities between internet fame and traditional celebrity culture, and arrives at a point where online fame is constituted by forces which are drastically different from the centralized production and dissemination of individual images. Here, we may return

to Brady's (1986) definition of fame again. Fame is a social status where one individual rises to prominence and poses an imagination upon those who watch him or her. The empirical findings suggest that in the latest metamorphosis of fame on social media, it is increasingly difficult to determine what the imaginations are. Here I would like to discuss this trend by situating it against the communicative environment of the internet, as well as the convergence of media industries.

It is not very precise to argue that fame is changing by gradually being emptied of substantive meaning and completely losing its signifying power. That sounds exactly like Boorstin's (1971) lament for the decline of culture and his diagnosis of film stars, who are well-known for their well-knownness. A jeremiad of fame has been written once sociocultural normativities were challenged by novel public figures, when the born-in-stable man acquired followers or a superstar's romantic love broke the internet. Instead, Brady's definition of fame reminds us to pay attention to the social system and the media technology constituting fame. We may thus regard this latest metamorphosis of fame as being embedded in two processes. Firstly, in line with Blommaert's (2018) argument, it is social media users' need to establish orders of indexicality, together with the algorithm-engineered connectivity (Van Dijck 2013) that a cultural trope is pushed to virality. Therefore, in an extreme case, fame becomes an effect of interaction which does not necessarily signify substantive content but relations in communicative environments. Secondly, the power to determine fame's substantive meaning is undergoing reconfiguration. There is always an imagination for what a celebrity means, but in the digital age of a networked society, the power to decide that is shifting towards the hands of individual users, and the moment when they appropriate such fame in local contexts.

Of course, in a convergent media environment, not every social media celebrity is a viral star. My empirical findings have shown that the post-feminist subjectivity still prevails, beauty vloggers still carefully fill their channels with communal and commercial contents, and political microbloggers are indeed pulling at the public's heart-strings. Fame as a predetermined sociocultural construct coexists with fame as an effect of online communicative practices. But without a centralized power of distribution like in the mass media, social media celebrities need to situate themselves in the algorithm-engineered connectivity to gain media visibility. The new condition to fame on social media is that these platforms are cultivating a new mode of observation among audiences, who are trained to follow and reinforce the popularity metrics-dependent visibility, and in many cases explain it with an 'it-just-happened' myth. Therefore, aspirants to fame on the internet need to add algorithmic logic and participation in virality into their repertoire.

I suggest that future research on the metamorphosis of fame could continue to trace the convergence between fame as a predetermined sociocultural construct and fame as an effect of communicative practice. The traditional entertainment incumbents are still pumping out new faces everyday and the internet is becoming one of the primary delivery channels for traditional celebrities. It is interesting to see how

popularity metrics-dependent media visibility and audiences' appropriation are redefining the career of entertainment stars. We can already discern some signs of development. For instance in China, a newly emerging type of entertainment star is called 'traffic celebrity', who is not very established in the industry, but has a large fan base on the internet and can generate tremendous traffic with his or her online presence. The algorithmic agency and popularity metrics are also redefining fandom experiences. We may connect the phenomenon of ideological polarization with the battle between fans and anti-fans. Moreover, fandom activities used to be characterized by intensive interpretation of cultural meanings. Now fans are also actively interpreting platform algorithms into applicable astroturfing strategies so as to 'boost traffic' for their idols.

To end this book, I would like to stress that a study on the metamorphosis of fame also provides insights on power and social change. It offers a diachronic lens through which nuanced traces of cultural change can be discovered at its frontier, when newer cultural identities test the tolerance of an older regime of social recognition. The year 2013 marked the high point of political microbloggers' fame in China. Big Vs were invited both to China Central Television's studio as guest speakers and into jail as criminals for the solicitation of prostitute and disseminating rumors. Three years later, the 2016 Sina Weibo Internet Red Convention demonstrates that beauty microbloggers, live streaming hosts and comic video stars have replaced political microbloggers as the new famous in China's online space. Big Vs are now called 'has-been internet reds'. In the discussion about communicative practices and social collectivities on the internet, Blommaert (2018) reminds us that dominant social powers are based on anachronisms, which cannot catch up with the new patterns of meaning-making in society. In my fieldwork, I have seen far more complex scenarios than silencing dissenting voices and replacing them with the patriotic soldier and the heroic mother who represent socialist values mentioned in Edwards and Jefferys' (2010) volume. They are anachronistic publicity strategies in Blommaert's sense, by promoting the fame as a predetermined sociocultural construct through centralized production and dissemination. On the internet, one needs to learn quickly. What I have seen is that after the actor's romantic relationship announcement, the current affairs magazine, which is in networked alliance with the Weibo account of the Communist Youth League of China, gained a large number of followers. For dominant social powers, viral fame on the internet is not a sin, but an alibi.¹⁰²

¹⁰² In the beginning of the book, I have mentioned that the Communist Youth League of China started a public discussion on whether it is wrong to like an internet red. The conclusion is that being an internet red is not a sin, as long as they can communicate more positive vibes to the public.

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SUMMARY

Social Media Celebrity **An Investigation into the Latest Metamorphosis of Fame**

This study approaches social media celebrity as the latest metamorphosis of fame. Modern celebrity is distinguished from previous forms of public visibility by its cultural preoccupation with personality and appearance, as well as its reliance on an industrial infrastructure for production and dissemination. By investigating social media celebrity from the perspectives of cultural meanings, industrial infrastructure, political significance and social function, the study finds that social media celebrity on the one hand maintains continuities with, and on the other hand manifests rupture from the traditional celebrity culture. The circulation of a socially meaningful cultural trope, be it about a personal sense of individuality or a political dissenting opinion, is increasingly reliant on the manipulation of platform popularity metrics and an effect of user appropriation on social media.

Chapter 1 introduces the theoretical and empirical justification of the research. Celebrity studies often focus on a topic of transfiguration in association with social and technical progress. In our digital age, social media users are also keen on the discussions about the mechanism and morality of internet fame. This leads to the research objective of the study on how social media celebrity culture both converges with and diverges from traditional celebrity culture.

Chapter 2 delineates a theoretical framework of metamorphic fame. The configuration of famous figures changes throughout history, due to the fact that fame is a cultural institution organizing both the individual sense of self and social relationships. Then this chapter zooms in on the theorization defining modern celebrity as a multifaceted construct against the socio-economic context since the early 20th Century in western societies. In the end, the chapter introduces that the conditions giving rise to traditional celebrity culture are changing, instantiated by the participatory ideal, automated-connectivity and social collectivities afforded by social media technologies.

The methodology of the study is discussed in Chapter 3. Digital ethnography is adopted as the approach to study the conditions and shape of fame on social media. The ontological and epistemological standings of ethnography allow the study to understand social media celebrity culture as users' situated semiotic practices in specific technical and cultural contexts. Nevertheless, doing ethnography in digital environments is challenged by the multifacetedness of the internet and the features of digital communication, in a way that contextualization becomes unpredictable. The concep-

tualization of digital practices as polycentric and opening to ever changing chronotropic configurations can help the ethnographic work to meet this challenge and is also consistent with the highly mobile and heterogeneously constructed fame on social media. Then the chapter introduces how the research fields in each of the case studies (Chapters 4–7) are constructed along the process of observation, rather than identified a priori. Finally, some ethical concerns are addressed.

Chapter 4 of this book explores the cultural meanings of Chinese social media celebrities, called the internet reds. It is found that although social media celebrities can enact bottom-up youth online identities in China, internet fame still exerts an ideological function in legitimating dominant cultural identities. The internet reds articulate gendered experiences of a neoliberal economic order and cultural discourses in contemporary China. Female fashion microbloggers and internet hosts represent the identity of *baifumei*, the fair-skinned, rich and beautiful girls in China. They embrace a globalized post-feminist subjectivity, for whom fashion and consumption practices are considered as a way of self-expression and a sign of economic achievement. These female internet reds are the 'glamorous high-achievers', who seem to benefit from the exuberant IT industry and market economy in contemporary China. In contrast, male internet reds are the underprivileged losers, namely *diaosi*. Characterized by mischievousness and humor, the comic video star epitomizes the Chinese precariat class, who experiences insecurity and frustration under the neoliberal economic order that China has adopted since the 1980s. However, the celebrity *diaosi* reconciles the contradiction within the alliance of the precariat class, by naturalizing the dominance of educated young professionals over migrant workers. Celebrity *baifumei* and *diaosi* together circulate the trope of 'male injury' and silence female sufferings in a social environment affecting both genders.

Chapter 5 discusses the industrial underpinnings of social media celebrity. The career of YouTube beauty vloggers is economically embedded in an industrial structure constituted by the platform's business model, technical affordances, the advertising market and commercial cultural intermediaries. Social media platforms like YouTube are undergoing the process of institutionalization in the context of media convergence. Multichannel networks professionalize grassroots YouTube stars by providing services that are offered by traditional celebrity agencies, but with the technical features and business models of the IT industry. In respect of managing individual YouTube channels and personal brands, the vloggers conduct meticulous entrepreneurial calculations considering the abovementioned factors with the aim of channel growth and high media visibility. This emerging industrial structure also gives rise to a distinctive cultural logic of social media celebrity. YouTube beauty vloggers' media representation is characterized by staged authenticity, managed connectedness, abundant celebrity figures and self-sufficient uniqueness. What we can conclude from this case study is that social media celebrity, like its predecessor on mass media, is a manufactured commodity supported by vigorous industrial forces.

The case study in Chapter 6 is to show that internet fame can be also achieved without the representation of a personal sense of individuality and the reliance on centralized production, diverging from the main features characterizing modern celebrity culture. Weibo political microbloggers in China are able to achieve high media visibility and exert influence on public opinion irrespective of their personalities or personal images. Instead, the microbloggers actively navigate through the popularity metrics and algorithms of the platform. One of the strategies is to form an alliance with like-minded microbloggers, academics, journalists, entrepreneurs and some politically expressive entertainment stars, so that an event or a piece of opinion can be co-promoted thus forming an echo chamber effect. This strategy reduces the diversity of perspectives in political discussions and leads to ideological polarization. It explains, to some degree, the highly homogeneous anti-governmental agenda of the political microbloggers in China. The microbloggers also selectively simplify their writings, where historical events and news stories are framed as a trigger to one's dissident stance.

The last case study on *Gangnam Style* in Chapter 7 discovers that internet fame may not entail pre-determined cultural meanings. Different from modern celebrity's signifying power, viral fame is constituted ad hoc by social media users' appropriation of the celebrity images as semiotic resources in contextualizing their communicative practices on social media. *Gangnam Style* is a polycentric construct orienting to the evaluative centers of the global mainstream popular music industry and local social discussions in South Korean society. This polycentricity enables the song to resonate with global as well as local Korean audiences, thus inviting further derivative appropriations. The numerous *Gangnam Style* parodies demonstrate that participatory culture is no longer restricted to fandom practices. In these parodies, the affective commitment is invested in re-contextualized communicative practices, the ultra-textual issues that parodists would like to address, and their consumption practices are marked by different drives, attitudes, and varied levels of agency and productivity. Those who share and parody *Gangnam Style* form ephemeral and lightly connected groups of audiences who would like to stay informed, trendy and sometimes be heard in the digital world.

Chapter 8 provides a summary of the study and concludes that social media celebrity instantiates the convergence between fame as a predetermined sociocultural construct and fame as an effect of online communicative practice. The chapter ends with suggestions for future research and social media celebrity's implication on power and social change.

Tilburg Dissertations in Culture Studies

This list includes the doctoral dissertations that through their authors and/or supervisors are related to the Department of Culture Studies at the Tilburg University School of Humanities. The dissertations cover the broad field of contemporary sociocultural change in domains such as language and communication, performing arts, social and spiritual ritualization, media and politics.

- 1 Sander Bax. *De taak van de schrijver. Het poëtische debat in de Nederlandse literatuur (1968-1985)*. Supervisors: Jaap Goedegebuure and Odile Heynders, 23 May 2007.
- 2 Tamara van Schilt-Mol. *Differential item functioning en itembias in de cito-eindtoets basisonderwijs. Oorzaken van onbedoelde moeilijkheden in toetsopgaven voor leerlingen van Turkse en Marokkaanse afkomst*. Supervisors: Ton Vallen and Henny Uiterwijk, 20 June 2007.
- 3 Mustafa Güleç. *Differences in Similarities: A Comparative Study on Turkish Language Achievement and Proficiency in a Dutch Migration Context*. Supervisors: Guus Extra and Kutlay Yağmur, 25 June 2007.
- 4 Massimiliano Spotti. *Developing Identities: Identity Construction in Multicultural Primary Classrooms in The Netherlands and Flanders*. Supervisors: Sjaak Kroon and Guus Extra, 23 November 2007.
- 5 A. Seza Doğruöz. *Synchronic Variation and Diachronic Change in Dutch Turkish: A Corpus Based Analysis*. Supervisors: Guus Extra and Ad Backus, 12 December 2007.
- 6 Daan van Bel. *Het verklaren van leesgedrag met een impliciete attitudemeting*. Supervisors: Hugo Verdaasdonk, Helma van Lierop and Mia Stokmans, 28 March 2008.
- 7 Sharda Roelsma-Somer. *De kwaliteit van Hindoescholen*. Supervisors: Ruben Gowricharn and Sjaak Braster, 17 September 2008.
- 8 Yonas Mesfun Asfaha. *Literacy Acquisition in Multilingual Eritrea: A Comparative Study of Reading across Languages and Scripts*. Supervisors: Sjaak Kroon and Jeanne Kurvers, 4 November 2009.
- 9 Dong Jie. *The Making of Migrant Identities in Beijing: Scale, Discourse, and Diversity*. Supervisors: Jan Blommaert and Sjaak Kroon, 4 November 2009.
- 10 Elma Nap-Kolhoff. *Second Language Acquisition in Early Childhood: A Longitudinal Multiple Case Study of Turkish-Dutch Children*. Supervisors: Guus Extra and Kutlay Yağmur, 12 May 2010.
- 11 Maria Mos. *Complex Lexical Items*. Supervisors: Antal van den Bosch, Ad Backus and Anne Vermeer, 12 May 2010.

- 12 António da Graça. *Etnische zelforganisaties in het integratieproces. Een case study in de Kaapverdise gemeenschap in Rotterdam*. Supervisor: Ruben Gowricharn, 8 October 2010.
- 13 Kasper Juffermans. *Local Linguaging: Literacy Products and Practices in Gambian Society*. Supervisors: Jan Blommaert and Sjaak Kroon, 13 October 2010.
- 14 Marja van Knippenberg. *Nederlands in het Middelbaar Beroepsonderwijs. Een case-study in de opleiding Helpende Zorg*. Supervisors: Sjaak Kroon, Ton Vallen and Jeanne Kurvers, 14 December 2010.
- 15 Coosje van der Pol. *Prentenboeken lezen als literatuur. Een structuralistische benadering van het concept 'litteraire competentie' voor kleuters*. Supervisor: Helma van Lierop, 17 December 2010.
- 16 Nadia Eversteijn-Kluijtmans. *"All at Once" – Language Choice and Codeswitching by Turkish-Dutch Teenagers*. Supervisors: Guus Extra and Ad Backus, 14 January 2011.
- 17 Mohammadi Laghzaoui. *Emergent Academic Language at Home and at School. A Longitudinal Study of 3- to 6-Year-Old Moroccan Berber Children in the Netherlands*. Supervisors: Sjaak Kroon, Ton Vallen, Abderrahman El Aissati and Jeanne Kurvers, 9 September 2011.
- 18 Sinan Çankaya. *Buiten veiliger dan binnen: in- en uitsluiting van etnische minderheden binnen de politieorganisatie*. Supervisors: Ruben Gowricharn and Frank Bovenkerk, 24 October 2011.
- 19 Femke Nijland. *Mirroring Interaction. An Exploratory Study into Student Interaction in Independent Working*. Supervisors: Sjaak Kroon, Sanneke Bolhuis, Piet-Hein van de Ven and Olav Severijnen, 20 December 2011.
- 20 Youssef Boutachekourt. *Exploring Cultural Diversity. Concurrentieoordelen uit multi-culturele strategieën*. Supervisors: Ruben Gowricharn and Slawek Magala, 14 March 2012.
- 21 Jef Van der Aa. *Ethnographic Monitoring. Language, Narrative and Voice in a Caribbean Classroom*. Supervisors: Jan Blommaert and Sjaak Kroon, 8 June 2012.
- 22 Özel Bağcı. *Acculturation Orientations of Turkish Immigrants in Germany*. Supervisors: Guus Extra and Kutlay Yağmur, 3 October 2012.
- 23 Arnold Pannenburg. *Big Men Playing Football. Money, Politics and Foul Play in the African Game*. Supervisor: Wouter van Beek, 12 October 2012.
- 24 Ico Maly, N-VA. *Analyse van een politieke ideologie*. Supervisors: Jan Blommaert and Sjaak Kroon, 23 October 2012.
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- 26 Mary Scott. *A Chronicle of Learning: Voicing the Text*. Supervisors: Jan Blommaert, Sjaak Kroon and Jef Van der Aa, 27 May 2013.
- 27 Stasja Koot. *Dwelling in Tourism. Power and Myth Amongst Bushmen in Southern Africa*. Supervisor: Wouter van Beek, 23 October 2013.

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